It runs in the blood

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/32223811.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Sirius Black/Voldemort, Sirius Black/Tom Riddle, James Potter/Lily Evans Potter
Characters:	Sirius Black, Tom Riddle, Voldemort (Harry Potter), James Potter, Bellatrix Black Lestrange, Regulus Black, Black Family (Harry Potter), Marauders (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	No Bashing, First War with Voldemort, Rare Pairings
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of It runs in the blood
Collections:	Amarillie Harry Potter Fanfictions, my heart is here, Into the rabbit hole, Ongoing fic, fics that can't get out of my mind, Fics that made me stim, HP works worth Reading Tom Centric, HP_WIP_to_die_for, Attendez_la_creme 🍲, Better than sex, Lilranko List of Beautifully Haunting Stories, Karaj's Favorite Stories, amazing portrayals of tom riddle | voledemort, best, HP tt/au/masterpieces 🚩🏳️🌈, the reasons why my laptop constantly lags, All time favs, Harry Potter Rereads, Ancient and Most Noble, Topaz's Collection of the most Splendid, Best most mouth watering fics I can actually stand to reread, Hp random love, Rereads: from beginning to the end, The Fields of Elysium, I wish I could read these for the first time, GihHarryPotterCollection, "How many times can the same thing break your heart? — As long as you love it.", Tom Riddle rabbit hole jump at your own risk, The Cookie Jar on the Highest Shelf, Menaka's List of Absolutely Magical Fics, Unofficial TRoR Discord Server Recommendations 2024, Arcturus' Treasure Hoard, Morally Questionable and Disaster MCs but They're Vibing, Vulnera_Sanentur, why can't I stop reading?, My potterhead treasure trove, Absolutely brilliant 💫, krakengirl's top tier favs of all time, hp fics I would die for, super cool and awsome works to show people, Shards of Emerald💚, fics i read and then reread, Fics I stay awake for
Stats:	Published: 2021-06-27 Updated: 2025-08-18 Words: 576,277 Chapters: 31/?

It runs in the blood

by Metalomagnetic

Summary

Sirius Black makes a different choice.

Notes

For the few of you that have been waiting for the Sirius/Voldemort I promised months ago. Please, let me know what you think of it.

- Translation into Русский available: Это у нас в крови by Red_Yennifer

Chapter 1

Voldemort is sitting in Sirius' comfortable armchair.

Sirius remembers stealing it from a witch he'd had a brief but tumultuous affair with. She'd scratched his bike when he broke it off with her, and in retaliation, he stole her armchair.

It has a pink unicorn painted on the side.

This is why Sirius' first impulse is to laugh at the absurdity of the image.

He always laughs at the most inappropriate of times.

Death is close, he reminds himself. Death is sitting in his armchair.

Sirius doesn't laugh; he takes his wand out, nonchalantly.

He doesn't try to attack. He flicks it and the candles on the wall come alive, casting sinister shadows on Lord Voldemort's face.

Or maybe it's his face that is sinister and the candles have nothing to do with it.

I am a Black. I will not show fear.

Sure, he says he's nothing like *them*, he disowns them every chance he gets. But so close to dying, there is no point in pretending anymore, is there? He is a Black and Blacks are proud creatures.

He walks casually, tightens his grip on his wand to stop his fingers from shaking, tucks the other hand in his pocket.

Brown eyes tinged with red follow him.

Sirius stops about five feet away from the armchair.

A faint smile plays on Voldemort's lips, turning his face even more sinister. Sirius stares at it- he'd heard descriptions from the few that had seen it and survived the encounter.

It sounded horrific- red eyes, waxy features, hallowed cheeks. And it is, really. It is horrific and yet not monstrous.

Not god-like. *Just a man.*

A formidable man. An exceptional wizard. The most accomplished at wielding dark magic.

But still, just a man. Sirius refuses to think otherwise.

A sick, twisted part of him feels pride at being singled out, deemed important enough, powerful enough to warrant an execution from the dark lord himself.

Voldemort remains silent, eyes unblinking.

Silence breaks lesser men, his father had told him, so long ago. *Never speak first.*

Sirius had discarded that lesson- had been rash and loud and always desperate to cover the silence.

Because in the silence, he could hear the Black blood whispering.

However, he just decided he will die a Black, so this time he lets the silence do its trick.

Sirius will not talk first. He is not the lesser man.

A car's tire backfires outside his windows a minute later and Sirius almost flinches.

Almost. *Blacks do not flinch.*

In his last minutes of earth, he thinks of James. He hopes James won't be the one to find his corpse.

(He thinks of his mother; if she'll care. If she'll show up at the funeral. If she will shed a tear. *'You are no son of mine.'*)

"Sirius Black." The voice is soft, but Sirius hears the undertone of strength in it.

Sirius smirks, because he *wins.*

"Would be awkward if I weren't," he mutters when Voldemort doesn't follow it up with anything else. "You break into people's houses like a common thief and yet you call yourself a lord," he drawls, and he feels that vindictive satisfaction he always gets when he riles someone up.

The Black taint is impossible to wash, no matter how hard he tries.

Are you sure you tried so hard?

"What do you want?" Voldemort asks, head slightly tilted, regarding Sirius with interest.

"You came to me," Sirius points out, confused.

"To find out what you want."

The light plays tricks on Voldemort's eyes as he leans forward, making them terrifying and strange and mesmerising. Sirius cannot look away, even if the barely contained fear tells him to drop his gaze. "So I can give it to you."

He does flinch then, surprise jolting his nerves.

“You want me to *join* you?” he asked, astonished.

Voldemort keeps staring.

Sirius finally gives into his impulse and laughs, because- *really!*

People usually have a reaction to Sirius- he’s instantly liked, adored, or he’s instantly hated.

Recently, he’s staring to be feared.

The point is, everyone reacts to him and his inappropriate behaviour.

Voldemort doesn’t. He keeps staring.

He’s like no one else you’ve ever met! Bella said, dreamily, when Sirius discovered the mark on her arm, right before he left his house, in his fifth year. *He’ll give us everything we need, Sirius! What we deserve!*

Even if he left, even if he disagrees with his family views, even if he has no inclination to slaughter muggleborns just because they exist, Sirius still thinks he *deserves* things, simply on account of being who he is.

Entitled, Remus called him, so many times.

“I’m a big boy,” he says. “I get what I want on my own, just fine.” And then, stupidly, he adds: “But thanks.”

Blacks truly are made of pride, it’s at the core of their personalities. And having someone as notorious as the Dark Lord come to him- *in person*-

It’s not the first time he is courted.

Bella had tried the hardest.

Malfoy keeps inviting him to visit Narcissa at his manor.

At the pubs Sirius goes on his own (down in Knockturn Alley where a voice deep inside insists he belongs), when it gets too much, when being good guy extraordinaire gets tiring, *stifling*, his drinks are often paid by others.

When Sirius asks who he has to thank for his alcohol, the bartender nods towards the shadows; Sirius sometimes recognises Rabastan, sometimes Even Rosier.

He’d always thought it’s Bella’s doing, all of it.

They’ve been closer than twins, once upon a time, even with the seven-year age gap.

Bella is… she’s not right in the head. She’d been lonely and pushed away. Sirius had been only a baby-to him, she never seemed crazy, either because of his age, or because he was not quite *right* either.

He used to waddle after her, in Grimmauld Place or her father's estate; she read aloud from her books to entertain him.

He cried when she left for Hogwarts, every year.

She taught him hexes and let him practice with her wand, before he was even six years old.

She calmed him down and kissed his cheek when he'd been eight and he'd thrown a jealous fit, so protective of her, when she went out on a date.

They don't matter, they're just boys. You're my soulmate, she told him.

He went to her wedding, with a scarlet and golden tie, a lion in a den of snakes. Shy of thirteen, he cornered Rodolphus before the reception and threatened to kill him if he ever hurt Bella. Rodolphus laughed and Sirius reminded him of the many, many books on the Dark Arts, unique exemplars that could only be found in the Black library.

Is this her doing, too?

But no, it cannot be. Bella had stopped talking to him for months.

His letters return, still sealed.

Traitor, she spat from under her mask, when they crossed paths, on an Order mission gone wrong.

Traitor, indeed. Sirius never told anyone about her mark.

He'd never seen Lucius', but he *knows* it is there. Yet Lucius is Cissa's husband, so Sirius says nothing about him, either.

"How in the hells would he know?" James had snarled at Prewett, when one twin had asked if maybe Sirius has some sort of inside information about Lucius' increasingly suspicious activity. "*He has nothing to do with those people!"*

James is Sirius' staunchest supporter; James tries to shield him from the suspicious gazes Sirius receives from most people.

James is a little blind-even with his glasses, he cannot see that no matter what Sirius does, no matter how much he tries to be good, no matter how many times he proves himself, all he has to do is level a gaze, square his shoulders and to everyone else in the Order, his Black blood screams louder than everything he might have to say.

And to the Blacks, Sirius will forever be a blood traitor.

Caught between blood and principles, between cousins and friends, hated and distrusted on both sides, Sirius only really has James, the one to truly see Sirius and nothing else.

There's Peter, too, he supposes.

Remus-Remus had never quite gotten over the *Incident* with Snape.

Sirius is tired, and he's reminded of it, pulled back from his thoughts.

Whatever else death will bring, at least he hopes it will bring rest.

"You don't know what you want, do you?" Voldemort asks.

There is no Legilimency involved; Sirius is a decent Legilimens himself, an even better Occlumenes.

Bella taught him from a very early age.

"I want you dead," Sirius offers.

"Do you?" Voldemort smiles. "I wonder why."

Sirius opens his mouth but closes it upon further consideration.

His reasoning will fall flat, will sound empty.

Because you are a murderer? Sirius is one, too.

Because you are a dark wizard? Sirius knows and uses enough dark curses when he can get away with it.

Because you are evil? Sounds childish.

"James Potter wants me dead," Voldemort says, and Sirius is truly afraid, for the first time, because he doesn't want this man to ever speak James' name again. "You're just drifting along, because you have nowhere else to go."

"Piss off!" Sirius snarls and his wand twitches in his hand, urges Sirius to *punish.*

Voldemort stands.

Sirius is a tall man, used to looking down at everyone. This is an exception. Voldemort has at least two inches over him.

Sirius hates it.

"They will cast you away," he says, softly. "You do not belong with them. You belong with your blood. My Death Eaters have interesting tales about you." Voldemort's eyebrow raises. "Dumbledore will not approve of your style, where he to find out. And he will, eventually."

Sirius thinks it's stupid not to use dark magic to counter dark magic. Sirius thinks it's senseless to allow a Death Eater to live, when they could be dead.

Sirius drifts apart from his allies in battle, draws Death Eaters further away and deals with them the way he knows.

Fire with fire.

Dumbledore would certainly not approve.

“You cannot contain darkness once it starts spreading,” Voldemort offers. “It will claim you in the end. Embrace it. I will give you free rein to be who you were born to be, unconstrained.”

“I was born to be a pain in the arse, dear mum says.”

He’s -he’s uncomfortable. He is uncertain and he doesn’t know how to deal with this, because Black are never uncomfortable.

Blacks are never flustered. Blacks don’t cry.

Blacks rage, though. That was always acceptable. Sirius knows how to express anger best.

And spite.

He knows how to strike where it would hurt the most.

He remembers his father whispering in the office-

“It is not wise to oppose Lord Voldemort, Walburga.”

He remembers his mother, snorting. “‘*Lord’, do you hear yourself? He’s only an upjumped mudblood, with ideas high above his station. You should have seen him, in his first year, with his crass accent, his second hand robes; how he was attacked, that very first night in the common room, by his betters.* ***Lord****, he says. Never!”*

His father insisted. *“I remember him having everyone under his thumb, by the time I got to Hogwarts. He is not to be messed with, Walburga.”*

Sirius inquired about Lord’s Voldemort’s identity. But Dumbledore shied away from the question, refusing to disclose a name.

Why, Sirius doesn’t know- but that’s Dumbledore. He keeps his secrets close to his heart.

No one else in the Order seems overly concerned with their biggest enemy true identity.

It drives Sirius mad. But they’re all Gryffindors there- and Gryffindors aren’t known for needing much information before they jump head first into a war.

“Speaking of my mum, I believe you know her, don’t you?” Sirius asks, filled with anger and venom.

Voldemort says nothing to that; he doesn’t take the bait, and it’s frustrating, it makes Sirius angrier.

“You champion your pureblood cause, but observe-” Sirius steps back, gestures at himself. “You are looking at the pinnacle of pureblood perfection. *I* am the purest, the *noblest* blood you’ll every set your eyes on. I will not bow to a mudblood,” he spits and *yes-there it is!*

Voldemort’s eyes spark, his fingers twitch and Sirius clutches his wand tighter-but at the last second, Voldemort doesn’t reach for his own.

“You have something against muggleborns?” Voldemort asks, lip twitching up, in a mocking smile.

Sirius is so chocked up, he can’t even come up with a witty answer.

Lily would understand, he thinks. Sirius is just trying to insult; not muggleborns-Voldemort.

“You do not belong there.”

“You know nothing about me-”

“They don’t either,” Voldemort counters. “But they suspect. I suspect. We all see the ‘*pinnacle of pureblood perfection’*. Bella calls you a traitor-she’s hurt, because you betrayed her. And yet, the only one you constantly betray, is yourself. Isn’t it tiring? To always pretend? To play nice? To act as if the world shouldn’t bow down to *you*?”

A thousand thoughts race in his head and there’s a voice- the Black voice- whispering in agreement.

“I know very well how that feels. I, too, had to pretend for many years. To ignore your dear mother and her ilk when they called me a mudblood. But once I was done pretending,” Voldemort smiles. “It is freeing. Do you not want to be free?”

Sirius does, so very badly.

He wants the conflict inside him to end.

But Sirius is better than his darkest instincts; or at least that is what James said, sternly, months after Sirius had tried to kill Snape, uncaring about how it would make Remus feel, uncaring of consequences, just filled with rage.

He casts a blood boiling curse, learned in the deepest, darkest corners of the Black Library.

Non verbally, powerful and with perfect aim.

Voldemort barely has time to block it.

But he does block it, when none of his Death Eaters had managed.

The attack does not anger Voldemort. If anything, it seems to please him.

See? His still there smile seems to ask. *No good Gryffindor would know such Dark Magic.*

Maybe he's reading too much into Voldemort's smirk.

Maybe he's projecting.

He casts another obscure spell, and another after it.

Eventually, Voldemort retaliates, but even proud, arrogant Sirius can tell the man is holding back.

That he'd be crushed in seconds if Voldemort truly wanted it.

It's the most exhilarating duel of his life.

It cannot last more than five minutes. His house is in ruins by the end.

Maybe casting Fiendfyre in such closed quarters wasn't the brightest idea Sirius ever had.

But when in the heat of battle, Sirius never cares about collateral victims, or even himself-all he cares, all he chases, is victory.

He doesn't obtain it now, ending up flat on his back, his wand in Voldemort's hand.

Sirius is not used to losing- he is the best duelist of his generation.

And sure, sometimes Fabian bests him; Moody certainly does when they train, but only because Sirius cannot use dark magic with them.

If he were to, he'd win. He senses it in his heart.

He used it now, more than he ever had before, but he'd been at most an annoying fly rather than a real threat to Voldemort.

Sirius takes comfort that at least this is the greatest dark lord in history. Surely, it's not that humiliating to lose to someone of such caliber.

And, to his great pleasure, he made Voldemort bleed.

A thin line of blood runs from his temple, over his cheek, dripping down his robe. Voldemort's eyes look redder, with the blood shining on his face.

"What did the Sorting Hat tell you?" Voldemort asks, bending over Sirius, who makes a tremendous effort not to cry out in pain, to not break under the vicious grip it has on him, reaching through his body.

"You do not belong there."

The hat had seen it before Voldemort, when Sirius had begged to go to Gryffindor, just to spite his mother.

"I will find a way to destroy you, if you don't do as I ask," Sirius had said, childish and arrogant and so very confident.

"Such a Slytherin thing to say." The hat had laughed. *"A lesson for you, young Black. When you do not listen to counsel, you will end up the worst for it. GRYFFINDOR!"*

"It said-" Sirius can barley talk, through the pain consuming him. "It said that I should tell you to go fuck yourself."

And fuck that stupid hat; Sirius is a Gryffindor.

No Slytherin would say that to Voldemort's face. Slytherins have self preservation.

Bella doesn't. Bella would tell anyone and everyone to go fuck themselves.

Bella is Sirius, if he'd been a woman.

Bella is his soulmate.

Bella is a Slytherin, through and through.

Voldemort laughs, a deep and surprisingly pleasant sound.

Sirius is losing far too much blood.

"What's your name?" he asks, curious. No one would tell him-the few that must know, refuse to utter it.

Voldemort performs the counter curse for some of the curses he inflicted upon Sirius, because the pain diminishes.

"And what's this curse?" Sirius can't help himself. It's a strong curse. Efficient. He wishes he had known it sooner, so he could have used it on certain people.

"My own creation. I shall teach it to you. I shall teach you everything. I will give you the world, Sirius Black. You only have to say 'yes'."

"No," Sirius says, because-

Well, above all else, above the fact that it would be wrong, he says it because he *can*.

Because he's made of spite. He always fucks up his life, just to spite others, doesn't he?

"Your name!" he demands. "Or are you so ashamed of it you cannot bear to say it? Too common? Too *muggle*? It's Smith, isn't it? Williams? You'll kill me in a second. What harm could it do to tell me?"

Voldemort stands to his full height. "A month. I shall return in a month for my answer."

What about Sirius' answers?

He tries to stand, but he's terribly dizzy. The floor is stained red, the only colour amongst the ashes.

Voldemort walks to the door, places Sirius' wand on a half destroyed end table.

"What did the hat say to you?" Sirius asks, just as the door opens.

His back to Sirius, Voldemort looks over his shoulder. His face in profile is somehow even more imposing than a full frontal.

"It was a short affair, unlike your sorting."

Sirius had sat on that chair for close to ten minutes. Everyone in Britain had heard of it. The *fucking* Prophet wrote an entire article about the Black scion's surprising sorting.

"It only had two words for me."

A short pause. Sirius's heart hammers in his chest; he gets to live for at least another month. He's groggy and in pain, but he's never felt more alive.

His Black blood is *singing*.

"Welcome, Heir."

The door opens and Voldemort is gone.

He knows how to make a dramatic exit, Sirus thinks, almost delirious.

Minutes later, the Aurors show up.

Chapter 2

"Death Eater attack," he tells Moody, as he's being treated.

"How many-"

"Auror Moody, do you mind?" A healer snaps at him. "I'm trying to care for my patient-"

"Three," Sirius answers after swallowing some bitter-tasting potion.

"Were they-"

"Out," Marlene says, running into the room. "Moody, out! Now!"

Moody grunts something about waiting in the hallway and backs away.

"'lo, McKinnon," Sirius greets her.

"Can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

"You can leave too," the Healer says, annoyed.

"But I am a Healer-"

"In training! This is advanced dark magic. Out!"

"But I want to learn-"

"Stay here and be quiet, then. Mr Black! Mr Black, open your eyes! Can you hear me?"

"Sirius? Oi, Black! Come on-"

"Get the Head Healer, now!"

Their voices come from far, far away.

(-)

"I swear to God, Alastor if Dawlish enters this room one more time-"

Lily. Sirius groans. What brain dead moron called *them*?

"… 'm fine," he mumbles.

"Padfoot?"

Sirius opens his eyes.

James is as white as the wall behind him, watching Sirius from the foot of the bed.

Lily's brilliant green eyes search Sirius all over.

"I'm fine," Sirius says again, with more conviction. His side hurts like hell, but he suppresses a wince.

He hates having them worry. They just married a week past, and now he's ruining their honeymoon.

"Go back to Greece," he says, uselessly. "I'm sure they'll let me get home in a minute."

"You're not fine!" Lily throws her hair over her shoulder. "There are traces of magic so dark on you, there's no telling what effects it might have. You're staying for observation, like it or not! Marlene said you almost died!"

"McKinnon tries to pretend she actually knows what she's doing," Sirius mumbles. "James! Stop looking at me like that! I'm not dead!"

James opens his mouth, but there is a ruckus of sorts outside the door.

"… access restricted." Dawlish voice, low and threatening.

"I'm not a bloody Death-Eater; here, check my arm."

Sirius sighs. "You're all making a big fuss out of nothing."

He tries to stand only for James and Lily to fall on him, pushing him back down. He's wearing one of those horrid hospital gowns-

"Did you let McKinnon see me like this?" he asks, struggling with all the arms holding him down. "She won't let me fuck her anymore-"

"She's engaged," Lily reminds him.

Peter comes through the door, having finally escaped Dawlish.

His face relaxes when he sees Sirius.

"If Remus comes through that door next-" Sirius threatens.

"You'll what?" Remus asks, entering the room.

(-)

"You can't go home," James says the next day. "Your house is destroyed. They had to Obliviate half the neighbourhood."

Sirius fumes. "If my leather jacket is gone, I'm going to throw a fit," he says.

"Which one?" Lily asks.

"Don't get smart with me!"

"You're coming home with us, when they'll let you go," James continues.

"Forget it! You are newlyweds."

Sirius will not be going anywhere near their house anytime soon. Not with Voldemort after him.

James knows him far too well, because he runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up.

"There would be three of us, if you will live at our house; even if Death Eaters come again, we have more chances if there are more of us to fight."

Sirius snorts.

There is no chance against Voldemort.

"Sleepy time," Marlene comes in. "Lovebirds, piss off. He needs rest."

"Can't I sleep here?"

"Potter, go home with your wife and leave Black alone."

Marlene gets them out. She's quite bossy when she wants to. She looks tired as she hands him the dreamless potion.

"How's the pain?"

"Fine."

"Black, I'm a fucking Healer. You can't bullshit me."

He lets her give him some other potion and falls asleep shortly after.

By the third day, he gets restless. Voldemort gave him a month, and Sirius is wasting his last days on earth in a stupid hospital.

"If you don't help me get out of here, I'll just escape on my own," he tells James, who reluctantly agrees to the plan.

He helps Sirius steal some pain relief potions, and they sneak out.

James wasn't exaggerating. His house is a ruin. It gives him a thrill, remembering the duel.

The destruction is mostly his fault. He's always been messy.

"This looks like Fiendfyre," James whispers. "The Aurors said so."

Sirius makes a noncommittal sound.

"Moody says Dawlish was asking how you'd know to extinguish one. Moody says they might give you some grief over it."

Luckily, Marlene, who knows him well, had snatched Sirius's wand from him before the Aurors could demand it for examination.

Sirius bristles. "Dawlish knows how to control Fiendfyre. Dumbledore knows it, too. But it is suspicious that I know?"

"One's an Auror, they're expected to have faced this sort of thing and the other one-well, he's Dumbledore-"

"And I'm a Black," Sirius says, hotly. "That's why it's *suspicious*."

James doesn't deny it. "Come, let's see if some of your stuff survived -"

"It wasn't Death Eaters," Sirius blurts out.

(In another world, he'd keep his mouth shut. He'd almost say it, but restrain himself at the last second. In another world, Sirius would stick with his story of three masked Death Eaters, would move to another small house and would wait for Voldemort to return. He would refuse him. After that, he wouldn't be courted anymore. He wouldn't be welcomed in the pubs of Knockturn Alley. Narcissa wouldn't invite him to Malfoy Manor.)

"It was Voldemort."

James immediately grabs him and Apparates him to Hogsmeade. "You ok?" he asks Sirius, brown eyes wide, searching for injuries as if Sirius hadn't just been released from the hospital.

"James-"

"Fuck! Voldemort? You got out alive? I know how good you are with duels, but-"

"It wasn't like that," Sirius says, but James is past listening, already in a frenzy.

"Come, we're going to Dumbledore."

That's why they're in Hogsmeade, of course.

"I don't want to talk to Dumbledore."

"Listen-I understand why you didn't tell the Aurors," James says, and he looks furious on Sirius's behalf. Even if he pretends he doesn't, James knows very well that if Sirius turns up relatively unscathed after a duel with Voldemort, even more people would think him a dark wizard than they already do.

"I don't want to talk to Dumbledore."

This is why he hadn't wanted to tell James. He's not sure what he has against Dumbledore-

It can't have anything to do with how Dumbledore *knows* Sirius.

"Why did you do it?" Dumbledore asks, looking old and tired and so disappointed, as sixteen-year-old Sirius sits in his office.

Sirius hates to be looked at like that, feels so embarrassed, so guilty, so unworthy of the chances he was offered in Gryffindor. As always, he has no clue how to deal with all of it. He could apologise- he is sorry; not for Snape, but for what he'd almost done to Remus.

But Blacks never apologise.

"Because Snape is an annoying git," he said stubbornly.

"He could have died. Do you understand that, Sirius? How grave that is-"

"Of course I understand!" Sirius doubles down, refusing to be crushed under the weight of Dumbledore's gaze, filled with disappointment and worry. "Why do you think I sent him there?"

Since then, well-suffice to say, Dumbledore gave him another chance, but Sirius knows he's closely monitored. The old professor had taken Sirius aside to talk about *how* he chooses to deal with Death Eaters only two months before.

“A dangerous, slippery path.”

James won't relent. "You need protection. My house won't be enough. We need to keep you safe, Sirius-"

"I can handle myself!" Sirius snarls and immediately feels terrible. "Sorry," he says. Black don't apologise, but he's not a Black, to or for James. He's just Sirius.

"I know you can, Padfoot." James clasps a hand on his shoulder. "Imagine if it were me that Voldemort came for." Sirius imagines it. It's his primary, if not the only reason for joining the Order. To keep James safe, to be able to be around him. "What would you do?"

"I'd take you to Dumbledore," Sirius says, resentful.

They walk the way to Hogwarts in silence. Sirius sees the Shrieking Shack and immediately looks away. It's not guilt- the guilt had been brief.

It just hurts, the consequences. Even James had turned his back on Sirius, after. He, too, had been all disappointed and refused to talk to Sirius for over a month; he had taken Remus's side, joined him in his indignant silence.

Which was fair, Sirius reminds himself, shaking the feeling off. Sirius had gone too far. It was normal for Remus to be upset. It was normal for James to be upset.

Twenty minutes later, they sit opposite Dumbledore. Sirius meets his eyes, refuses to look away, refuses to fear what he will see once he says the words.

"He wants me to join him."

"Fuck!" James exclaims, besides Sirius, as if that's even worse than Voldemort wanting to kill Sirius.

In a way, it is.

"He must want you badly if you're sitting here after you refused him," Dumbledore comments.

"This is so bad." James stands. Paces.

"But not unexpected." Dumbledore doesn't look away from Sirius. James stops, turns to stare at the headmaster.

"Professor-" he says, a warning in his tone.

"Sirius makes use of questionable, ill-reputed magic. It was bound to be noticed," Dumbledore says simply.

"So what?" James asks, though if he'd heard of anyone else in the Order using dark magic, he wouldn't be so understanding. Not at all. "Sirius is *loyal-"*

"I know," Dumbledore says in a soothing way.

Do you?

(-)

James tells Lily. Because she and James are now basically the same person.

"We shouldn't worry Wormtail and Moony," James declares, but what he means is Remus still hadn't forgiven Sirius fully, still has trust issues. Who can blame him, really? Sirius tried to use him as a murder weapon, not three years before.

(-)

Sirius tells Peter.

Peter is small and quiet; he thinks before he acts. Peter had known, back in their fifth year, what Sirius was about to do.

Peter had been the only one to talk to Sirius, *after*:

"Dumbledore suggested the Fidelius," Sirius says.

Peter nods. Then frowns. "I hope you're not about to ask I do it," he says. "You're my best mate. I wouldn't want to get you killed."

"You think too little of yourself," Sirius hisses, annoyed.

They are such opposites, he and Peter. One too arrogant, one too modest. One too loud, one too quiet.

"I won't hold well under torture, let's face it. It's just facts, Sirius. Nothing else."

"You would," Sirius insists.

"I'd rather not, to be perfectly honest." Peter shrugs.

"I'm not going to do it, anyway. I'm not the hiding type."

Peter nods, and they change the subject.

(-)

"Send me on my way," Marlene says, still breathing hard.

"Get on your way," Sirius tells her, grabbing the bottle of firewhsikey from the nightstand.

But she just curls closer to him, throwing one of her skinny legs over his.

"My shift starts in an hour," she mumbles. "I hate work!"

"Same."

She snorts. "You haven't worked a day in your life, Black."

"Because I *hate* work," he says, handing her the bottle.

She sips at it without lifting her head off his chest.

It spills everywhere.

"How long will the gold from your uncle last you?"

"A lifetime," he says darkly.

It's not that much gold, but Sirius won't live long enough to spend it all.

Eventually, Marlene stands and starts looking for her clothes.

"You ripped off my shirt!" she yells at him.

"I don't remember you protesting as it happened. Take one of mine."

"Gideon will notice," she mutters, searching through the trunks on his floor.

He's been living in the new house for two weeks.

He still hasn't unpacked.

He still hadn't bought an armoire.

He did all that for his previous house. James and the boys had come, right after graduation, Lily in tow, and they worked on it for a week straight, hanging pictures and posters, building furniture the muggle way, Lily bringing him things he hadn't thought of, like bedsheets and pillow covers.

It looked nice, once it was over.

But when alone, Sirius had sat on his sofa, and he hadn’t felt at home.

Nothing ever feels like home.

So what is the point in trying anymore?

"You're back with him?" Sirius asks, lighting a cigarette.

She throws him a look over her shoulder. "You saw us together two nights before. At Dorcas' party."

Sirius has no recollection of even being there.

He shrugs. "Take that one; it's new. Haven't worn it yet." He points to it.

Marlene lifts the Led Zeppelin t-shirt, her nose wrinkled. She pulls it over her head.

It comes up to her knees.

"Oh, yes. He won't think anything is amiss if I am dressed in a muggle *tent*."

Sirius watches her struggling to transfigure it into something that somewhat fits her.

Only after that, when she goes to the bathroom, she finds a hot pink top.

Sirius has no idea whose it is or how it ended up there. "Perfect," he says. "You can take that one."

Whoever it used to belong to will not return to retrieve it.

Marlene seems displeased about it, as she always is when she finds knickers between his couch cushions or lipstick in his bathroom cabinets.

Once she leaves, Sirius stays in bed, drinking and staring at the empty walls.

(-)

"Absolutely not!" Remus shakes his head. "You won't be coming to the next full moon. You're injured."

Sirius takes a sip of the tea Remus made him.

"I'm fine," he says. "It was nothing, just a scratch-"

"One day, we'll find you decapitated, and you know what your head will say, two feet away from the rest of your body?" Remus demands.

"Aren't you morbid?" Sirus asks.

"It will say, *'I'm fine. It was nothing. Just a scratch'*."

"Have you been watching those zombie movies again?" Sirius inquires, amused.

"You're not coming, Sirius."

"Greyback might come after you."

Sirius had sniffed the other wolf around, ever since the first full moon after Hogwarts.

He's tracking Remus to take him in his pack, as he does with all those he turns.

Sirius won't let him.

Werewolves have a hard time refusing the one who turned them, everyone knows it. Especially in wolf form.

"He hasn't been there for two months. And if he returns, James and Peter will watch out for me."

James and Peter won't fair too well against Greyback. James is a decent duelist, but… he is no match for the ancient werewolf.

"I'll be there. Don't waste your breath." Sirius glares at Remus until he sighs, defeated. "And," he adds. "If you ever find my decapitated head, and it's still talking, send it to Grimmauld. My mum will hang it beside the dead house-elves. I can scream at her every time she comes down to the kitchen."

(-)

Thirteen days, he thinks, as he races his bike on London's streets.

It is like an internal clock that won't stop ticking.

Sirius is determined to enjoy the time he has left, only there is no enjoyment to be had.

He supposes there might be, that when he's pissed out of his mind, he might be having a good time, only he can't remember much of it when he wakes up.

I'm just nineteen, he thinks, desperate. How is it fair that he's already so exhausted that nothing makes him happy anymore?

How is it fair to die before he turns twenty?

Blacks don't do self-pity, he reminds himself, focusing on the rage the thoughts bring instead, discarding the fear.

He makes an abrupt turn on an abandoned street, the steel bars on his bike scratching the pavement, sending sparks in the air.

Sirius checks if he's alone, and then he pushes the invisibility button and lifts the bike towards the sky.

Higher and higher, he races to the clouds until the air becomes so thin, it's unbreathable.

The stars are his only home; the sky is filled with Blacks, all above him.

"Where do we go when we die?" Sirius asks his mother after his great grandfather's funeral.

His feet hurt after standing all day.

She takes him in his arms and walks with him to the window.

"There," she points to the dog star. "We become stars. Grandfather is there now."

Sirius frowns. "But that's my star. If Grandfather Sirius took it, where will I go?"

She kisses his temple. "There's enough space for both of you."

"No! It is my star! I won't share it! I don't like to share!"

He hates having to share her with his baby brother. Ever since Regulus was born, he always has to share.

"I want my own star! And when I am head of the family, I won't let anyone else use the name 'Sirius'. It's mine! I don't want to be like anyone else."

She laughs. "You aren't like anyone else. But family is all we have, Sirius. It's the most sacred of things. If their name isn't Black, they are enemies. Remember that, my brightest star."

Sirius makes a strangled sound and reaches further up until he can't breathe anymore.

And then he steers the bike down and lets it fall.

The earth rushes towards him, fast. The wind tries to blow him off the bike, but he holds the handlebars hard.

Adrenaline chases away anything else, and Sirius laughs.

Every time he does it, he goes closer and closer to the ground before pulling the bike up.

He used to think that is how he will go, one day.

That he'll fly close to the stars, drop down to the ground with dizzying speed and when he hits the pavement, he'll just float back up to his family.

Now is your chance, a voice whispers.

If Sirius wants to go that way, he should do it.

Otherwise, all he'll see before his death will be a pair of red eyes and a green light rushing for his chest.

The buildings are getting closer, taller, bigger, the cars clearer.

Sirius can see the trees, can smell them-

He pulls up the bike at the last possible second and lands roughly some seconds after.

He parks it and goes looking for a pub.

(-)

"Are you sure-"

"Remus!" Sirius hisses sharply.

Peter and James exchange a look.

"He said he's fine," James says after a second.

"Alright, then."

Sirius is not fine; his side still hurts something awful, he still has to go to St. Mungo for treatment, and he should not transform.

But it's the *last* full moon.

Sirius needs to be there.

And if Greyback tries to sniff them out again, Sirius will kill him.

Because he won't be there anymore to keep Remus and the others safe.

He'll rip the werewolf to shreds, and what if James won't talk to him again?

He can go ten days without talking to James; he did before.

And then Voldemort will come, and it won't be a problem anymore.

James will feel guilty afterwards. Sirius can hear him crying to Lily. *"I didn't talk to him, and now he's dead. I called him a deranged psychopath, and now I can't apologise."*

And Lily would say: *"You were right to scream at him, James. He killed someone! Besides, Sirius knows you loved him. Wherever he is now, he won't focus on one bad week when you two had eight years of wonderful memories."*

"Mate?"

Sirius shakes his head.

"Right," he forces himself to smile at James. "Let's do it."

Sirius turns first. He has the most sensitive smell, so he is the one to scout the location, every time.

It hurts terribly. With the transformation, the pain relief potions and the charms on his wound stop being effective.

“Pain makes you stronger,” his father says, watching Sirius fidget.

Sirius had cried, and he'd been caught. His father didn't want him crying, so he'd punished Sirius to stand all night, alone in the dungeon. He was not allowed to sit or run. *Just stay still.*

Hours in, the pain in the small of his back had grown too much for him to ignore.

His legs burned, and then they went numb.

“Pain cleanses the weakness,” his father said, when morning came, and he arrived to let Sirius up. “*If you learn to overcome it, it can never be used against you.”*

Sirius is disappointed when he gets no whiff of Greyback.

Peter comes scurrying out of the cabin when Sirius barks, once, to let them know it is safe.

He climbs on Sirius's fur, sinking its tiny claws in it.

Lazy git, Sirius thinks, barking and trying to shake him off. Peter doesn't budge.

Sirius doesn't mind it. He knows it's not really laziness. Peter simply can't keep up with a giant dog, a stag and a werewolf.

He can't protect himself from any predators in that shape, so he always sits on Sirius' back.

He'll sit on James', the next full moon.

James comes with Remus, minutes later.

Remus looks afraid, as always. No matter how many full moons he endures, it never gets easy.

He pats the stag's head and then heads into the clearing to stand under the rising moon.

When Remus starts screaming, Sirius howls.

(-)

"Oh, great," Sirius slurs, getting off his bike with difficulty.

Just what he needs, Dumbledore on his doorstep.

"It's three in the morning," he barks.

"It is actually half-past four," Dumbledore corrects him. "I did not mind waiting. It's been a while since I could just take the time to observe nature."

There is a lot of nature going on around the house. Sirius picked it this way so when Voldemort will come to kill him, there won’t be any neighbours to serve as collateral victims.

Sirius rolls his eyes, stumbling to the door.

"I'm rather tired. And drunk. So-"

"Luckily, I just happen to have a sobering potion in my pocket."

Sirius glares at him.

"A coincidence, I assure you. I am not implying your habits have become so well known, people assume they need to have a sobering potion on them when meeting you," he says, *implying* it.

Sirius lets him in his house- rather, Dumbledore enters his house and, Sirius has no choice but to follow him.

"What do you want?" he asks, after gulping down the potion.

He hates it. The swift return to a sober state always brings a headache.

"There are less than ten days left, and you haven't made any plan."

"Or maybe I have a plan, and I just didn't share," Sirius says, petulant.

"This isn't a joking matter-"

"I'm not joking. I have a plan."

"Oh, I know you do. But it is not one I will allow you to see to fruition."

"You think I'll accept his offer, don't you?" Sirius can hear the bitterness in his tone.

Dumbledore fixes him with his piercing eyes. "No. I think you mean to die."

Ah.

"Got me," Sirius mutters, searching around the boxes in the kitchen. He has no cabinets. Why would he?

He finds a bottle of rum. *Really? Rum?* When did he buy it? He hates it.

Better than nothing.

"Want some?" he asks Dumbledore, who just shakes his head.

All for the best, since Sirius doesn't have any glasses.

"I won't let you lay down your life, for no reason-"

"Ah, but you would if there was a reason, no?"

"Sirius, why do you insist-"

"You think I don't know what you all think of me? How many times have you pulled me aside to warn me about-"

"I worry about you, yes. Besides that, I am afraid it is an acute case of paranoia that makes you think we all distrust you."

Sirius laughs.

"Maybe some people worry too- you must admit, you do not make it easy for anyone to-"

"Nothing will make them trust me. I'm a Black."

"It's nothing to do with your blood, Sirius. It's the way you act."

Dumbledore doesn't seem to understand his behaviour, his blood and his name are all very closely intertwined. They come in a package. Can't have one without the other.

"What do you want from me, then? Tell me of your great plan to save my life."

Dumbledore watches him for a few seconds.

"I want you to join him."

Sirius hadn't laughed so hard since he ran away from Grimmauld Place.

(-)

"This isn't a good idea," James tells Dumbledore, later in the day, when he'd come to check on Sirius and found them talking about Dumbledore's plan.

Well, Dumbledore's been talking. After Sirius stopped laughing, he'd mostly stayed silent.

Very fast, the idea started to sound *appealing.*

For one, Sirius might get to live longer. And-

But he tries not to think about the other part.

"Besides the dangers, it's Sirius! He'd make the *worst* spy in existence. Everyone knows that. He's loud, he stands out and speaks his mind -"

That's precisely why he'd work. No one in their right mind would ask Sirius to spy.

To fight, yes.

To kill. To protect. But to *spy?*

"I thought you were warning me of going down the wrong path," Sirius says calmly, once James is done with his fit. "Sending me to Voldemort won't take me off that path."

Dumbledore takes a long time to answer.

"You're loyal to your friends. That will always keep you afloat."

"Stop insulting him!" James raises his voice.

James thinks Sirius cares about the cause, about injustice, about world peace.

Dumbledore is a far better judge of character.

"I'll do it," Sirius says, shutting James up. "I'll do it."

Dumbledore searches his face, before he nods, once.

"Sirius-" James begs.

But there is no turning back. Sirius *wants* to. He could see Bella again; it's the main thought that goes through his head. Maybe Regulus will talk to him if he believes Sirius is back on the 'right track'.

And he's happy to be given permission, for once, to be *bad*. By Dumbledore.

He can be bad with an excuse. For the greater good, as it were.

James protests. Accuses Dumbledore that he's toying with Sirius's life. Dumbledore is, for sure, but Sirius doesn't mind it so much.

People forget the old professor might be kind and patient and grandfatherly, but at the end of the day, he's a leader in a war. Eventually, soldiers become numbers instead of people.

Sirius understands it.

(-)

At their next meeting, James isn’t there.

Dumbledore speaks of the allure of the dark, of the appeal of power. He yaps for two hours, and Sirius pretends to care, pretends to be worried when Dumbledore insists how dangerous this will be.

“You will be tested, more than you imagine.”

“I do imagine,” Sirius answers.

“He is extremely charismatic-”

“Didn’t you call him a bloodthirsty tyrant the other day?”

“Those traits are not mutually exclusive. He will be at his most charming with you in the beginning, to pull you in. Always keep in mind that it is all an act.”

Sirius nods.

“You are a good Occlumenes, and he’ll expect you always to meet his eyes, because you have that kind of reputation. And Sirius, you have to stop drinking. You need your wits about you.”

Sirius nods again, absentmindedly.

Dumbledore speaks for a long time; how Sirius should act, what he should say when Voldemort comes. It goes in one ear and out the other.

Sirius itches for a drink; he’s so excited he can’t stay put anymore, but Dumbledore still talks and *talks.*

“You are a good man, Sirius,” he says when he finally seems to have said all he had wanted to.

“We both know that is not true,” Sirius counters.

Dumbledore gives him a a somber look.

“I know you have a good heart. I know you *can* be a good man.”

“Are you a good man?” Sirius asks, standing.

“No,” Dumbledore doesn’t hesitate. “But I am trying. It is a daily effort to do what is right instead of what is easy. Sending you to spy for me isn’t what a good man would do. If you die, and make no mistakes, if he catches on, he will kill you, it will be something I will always have to carry with me-”

“Poor you,” Sirius spits, full of contempt.

“As I carry many of my decisions.”

Sirius delays by the door. Somehow, Dumbledore’s wrinkled face makes him feel some pity.

“I would have died anyway,” Sirius says, but doesn’t wait for an answer, leaving the office.

(-)

Voldemort *knocks*.

Sirius is a mess of excitement mixed with fear. Buried under his confidence that he can do anything in the world, a tiny voice whispers that he's nineteen and this is the most powerful dark wizard of all time.

It sounds like Remus. Sirius ignores it.

He opens his door and steps back. All very civilised.

"Tea?" he drawls, making sure to infuse it with as much sarcasm as possible.

Voldemort's lip twitches, and Sirius cannot say if it's in amusement or in annoyance.

"I'm not afraid of you." Sirius half-lies when they're standing almost face to face in his new living room. "I do not kneel at anyone's feet."

Because it wouldn't be believable if he suddenly shifted personalities overnight.

Also, because Sirius truly couldn't do it, for anything in the world.

"Does Dumbledore say I require kneeling?"

Sirius blinks. "It's sort of common knowledge."

"Is it? I wonder who spreads it."

Sirius smiles. "Your Death Eaters, on trial. It's public record; you can check it out."

Voldemort smiles himself, thin lips stretched but not parted. "I would imagine they think it more probable to be absolved of their so-called crimes if they present themselves as victims, terrorised into submission."

That sounds like an excellent story. Sirius is sure it's not true. Dumbledore did say Voldemort will be charming. Convincing.

"However," Voldemort continues, smile gone. "I demand respect."

Sirius doesn't like people demanding things of him. "Then we're in perfect agreement. I demand the same"

Voldemort looks surprised for the briefest moment. He, too, probably dislikes having people demanding things.

"Treat someone the way you want to be treated, and all that." Sirius goes on, antagonistic.

Dumbledore had come up with a thousand ways for Sirius to approach this, with reasons he would give to Voldemort for his decisions.

Sirius is not a planner. He's already far deviated from all of it.

“Rumour is you do not treat people in kind,” Voldemort says, without missing a beat.

Sirius doesn’t. He’s harsh, on occasion, to people that showed him compassion because he believes it’s a form of pity, and he doesn’t want anyone pitying him.

And when someone wrongs him-well, Sirius will give back, *tenfold.*

“Perhaps not my inferiors,” Sirius says, relishing in it, in not only being able to voice this opinion, but having to. Sirius can be all Black, pureblooded and born in wealth and privilege. It’s expected of him in this circle. “You’re clearly not my inferior.”

Another tight smile. “No? I do believe you called me a mudblood last we talked.”

“I don’t believe mudbloods are my inferiors. It was posturing. Surely you recognised it.” Sirius will not be able to pretend all muggle-borns are dirty, stupid animals for any amount of time.

“Oh, you believe it,” Voldemort says.

“I don’t.”

“Then why join me, ‘champion of pure blood cause’ as I am?"

“Plenty of people follow you for other reasons,” Sirius shoots back. “Power, for one.”

“Indeed.” Voldemort moves, sits uninvited on the couch Sirius had just purchased.

Sirius remains standing.

“You are not one of those people.”

Sirius bites his lip. Why is he so excited about doing this?

It’s not to help Dumbledore or the Order.

No, he’s not as altruistic as that.

“As you pointed out, I’m tired of pretending,” he settles on. It is not a lie.

Voldemort considers him in silence. “Yet you will have to pretend. Surely, you surmised I will ask you to spy on Dumbledore, at least for a while.”

Sirius hadn’t, on his own.

But Dumbledore did, had told Sirius Voldemort will ask for it.

“Yes. But it will not be my entire life.”

That is the crux of the matter-why Sirius accepted this madness. He simply wants a break. Wants to be able to let loose all that pent up anger that is not acceptable in society.

“You will take the mark, of course.”

Sirius wrinkles his nose. Branded with that, for the rest of his life doesn’t sound appealing.

“I do not see the matter; you’re already heavily tattooed,” Voldemort observes. “Dumbledore will expect it.”

Dumbledore does. “Here?” he asks. “Now?”

“Is there supposed to be a ritual, preferably in a cemetery, where we kill a muggle child and eat his heart? I’m sure Dumbledore likes to come up with all sorts of scenarios to make me monstrous.”

Sirius snorts. “Not heard that one, no.”

But he’d heard Voldemort has a penchant for the dramatic, for rituals indeed, for symbolism.

Taking a vow that will forever impact his life in his sparsely furnished living room -

Sirius was never one for formalities, so it doesn’t bother him. It’s just a surprise.

So he strolls forward, extends his left arm, palm up, his stomach fluttering.

He doesn’t expect Voldemort to ask him to kneel, not after their conversation earlier, even if that is how caught Death Eaters says he does it. But he expects Voldemort to stand.

He doesn’t. He remains seated, at a height disadvantage.

Sirius very much likes looking down on him.

Slender, pale fingers wrap around Sirius’s equally pale wrist. He doesn’t flinch, but he had not expected Voldemort to be so cold. It’s immediately chased by fire when the yew wand touches his skin and pain flares.

“Horrid,” Sirius says, refusing to show the pain. “Truly terrible design.”

Voldemort laughs, his eyes shining with merriment. Who’d have expected him to be so cheery?

“I was sixteen when I came up with it,” Voldemort says. “I admit I have many talents, but design is not necessarily one of them.”

“Did you come up with Lord Voldemort at sixteen as well? It certainly sounds like something only a sixteen-year-old would make up.”

Sirius smirks, resisting the temptation to scrub his tattoo, which still burns. “I think you did, and you now realise how silly it sounds. That’s why you’re not keen on people saying it.”

“I don’t mind people saying it. I certainly prefer it over ‘You-know-Who’ or ‘He-who-must-not-be-named’.” His lip twists in a grimace. “They simply grew too afraid to utter it.”

“Pathetic.” Sirius sneers. He cannot abide such weaknesses. What sort of moron fears a name?

“I am sure you realised a great portion of the wizarding world *is* pathetic.”

Hard to argue with that.

The mark hurts more than he expected. Sirius has the instinct to cut his arm off, just to get rid of the pain.

He’s well accustomed to injuries, but this one seems to reach into his soul, making it impossible to ignore.

Your father taught you how to ignore it, Sirius tells himself. *He made you strong.*

If Voldemort expects Sirius to express some type of discomfort, he doesn’t show it, letting his eyes trail over the empty walls.

“I’ve just moved here,” Sirius says, just so he can focus on something other than the pain. “*Someone* destroyed my old house.”

“You destroyed it,” Voldemort says, which is not a lie. “You and Bella are remarkably similar; too much power, too little discipline.”

Mention of Bella goes a long way in fighting the pain. “Neither of us take kindly to discipline,” Sirius says. “Just ask our parents.”

“I am nothing like your parents,” Voldemort points out the most obvious thing in the world.

Sirius nods. “True. You are nowhere near as scary as my mother.”

“No one can yell as loudly as she does,” Voldemort says, face blank but his tone is light.

Imagining his mum yelling at the dark lord is... something.

“Bella insisted you mother is the reason you abandoned your heritage.”

Sirius doesn’t answer.

“Does she know? Bella? That you are here?”

“No,” Voldemort’s eyes are back on Sirius.

How did he get that colour, he wonders. *What was the original one?*

“I did not wish for her to be disappointed, in case you refused me.”

Does he truly care about her?

Dumbledore says Voldemort doesn’t care about anyone, but Sirius learned to take everything the headmaster says with a grain of salt.

After all, Bella loves- she adores her sisters and once she'd loved Sirius.

Sirius loves.

And they are both terrible, selfish arseholes.

If they care, Voldemort must care about something, too.

Only human, Sirius reminds himself. *He is just a man, like any man. Better, but the same, in essence.*

"But she will know, right?" Sirius asks, almost desperate. "I understand this implies secrecy and whatnot, but she-"

"She will know, yes." Voldemort doesn't seem surprised to hear how much Sirius clearly wants her back in his life.

Voldemort stands, a fluid motion.

"The mark will react badly to any charm or potion meant to alleviate the pain," he says.

"I have my special potions," Sirius says.

Voldemort raises an eyebrow.

Sirius points to a table in the corner, with many bottles on it.

"Ah," Voldemort nods, sharply. "You and Rabastan will get along swimmingly."

Sirius feels the first flash of irritation of the night. The first sign that this will be hard and taxing.

He wants to point out that Sirius doesn't need Voldemort to tell him he'll get along with Rabastan.

Sirius grew up with Rabastan. They tasted their first drink together, at twelve, in the gardens of the Lestrange Manor.

He doesn't need Voldemort to tell him *anything*.

Shut up, just shut up. Keep your temper.

Voldemort looks smug and he must be aware of Sirius's shift in mood.

"I shall leave you to your *potions*," he says. "And Sirius? Once the mark heals, when it will burn, I expect you to Apparate where it leads you, *without* delay."

"Yeah," Sirius spits through clenched teeth, struggling not to say anything else.

And this was only the first half an hour in his career as a Death Eater.

The vodka doesn’t help with the pain.

Neither does the whiskey.

Sirius gives up on trying to ignore it and curls on the floor, cradling his arm to his chest.

It starts to dawn on him, what he’d done.

He covers his arm with his sleeve, though it’s ten times worse with even the lightest of material touching it.

But he just can’t stand to look at it any longer.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His left forearm is still on fire the next day. It never stopped, not even for a second.

"He marked you sooner than I expected," Dumbledore says, standing and walking to the tall window overseeing Hogwarts' vast grounds. "Usually, it takes some months."

"I'm special," Sirius spits.

Dumbledore served him tea. Sirius has the urge to throw it over Phineas Nigellus' stupid face.

"He must have determined it is not wise to give you time to change your mind. Take advantage of this brief period where he will allow you more leeway. Try to gain his favour. With your name and your… predilections for dark magic, you might climb high. And if you can breach that inner circle-it might be what we need to win this war."

Sirius is more concerned with the way Phineas is looking at him.

Is that disappointment? Scorn? Pride?

"But you have to act right, and for that, you need to be sober."

"People tell me I'm easier to stomach when I'm in my cups," Sirius answers back.

"You should know Voldemort despises drinkers. He doesn't drink."

"As If I needed more reasons to not like him."

Dumbledore goes on about something no doubt important, but Sirius uses all his attention to control the urge to roll his sleeve and look at the disgusting mark.

He resists. He knows what he'll find there, anyway. Skin inflamed, still oozing blood, a day later, that terrible skull with the slimy snake coming out of its mouth.

You don't need to look at it, he tells himself, over and over, ignoring Dumbledore. *It hasn't gotten any worse. Nor any better.*

(-)

James doesn't ask to see it.

He and James used to compare cock size when they were fourteen, but this feels far more intimate.

In fact, James does his best not to look at Sirius's left arm altogether, even if the mark is covered.

Lily knows.

But that is all.

Sirius tells Peter Voldemort came, Sirius refused him, and that was that.

"Lucky," Peter says. "It could have gone worse."

"Yeah, it could have."

(-)

On the fifth day, Sirius wakes from a drunken stupor, and he doesn't know what's wrong.

It takes some seconds to sink in that there is no more pain.

The skin is smooth around the black lines, and there is no blood.

It healed.

Sirius will never heal. *This is only the beginning.*

(-)

Living is complicated when he keeps waiting for the mark to flare at any second. He does his best not to drink because it would be dire indeed if Voldemort calls him when Sirius doesn't even remember his name.

He can't stand it. How else is he supposed to pass the time, to drown that anger always simmering under the surface?

James and Lily are a couple.

Remus is- sometimes Remus annoys Sirius like no one else can, with his *knowing*, judging eyes.

And Peter- Sirius loves him, but he has a cautious nature, a voice of reason that points out all the stupid things Sirius wants to do are bad, *bad* ideas.

With something akin to horror, he realises he can't even fuck whoever he wants. Not without careful manoeuvring. No one in the wizarding world can see that abomination on his arm.

"I'm going to start an exclusively Muggle *diet,*" he complains to James a day later. "Nothing else to do."

Lily rolls her eyes. "Until Marlene comes knocking on your door."

"What are you talking about? I can say 'no' to McKinnon!"

"Then why don't you?" James asks him, helping Lily with the dishes.

"That was a marvellous meal, Lils. What was it again?"

James and Lily exchange a look, but they don't bother him about Marlene anymore.

(-)

He's in a terrible mood, lying on the floor of his mostly empty house, staring at the wall, willing himself not to drink.

He can't take the waiting anymore.

It's been a week. *Just call me already.*

Sirius just wants to do something. Anything.

And then it comes. A knock on the door.

He glances at the clock. A few minutes before midnight.

The knocks grow louder, insistent.

He makes his way down the stairs, but before he reaches the door, it *blows* off.

Sirius takes cover behind a wall, wand out, heart racing.

What the fuck?

He takes a peek, and his mouth goes dry.

Emerging from the debris, Bella steps into his house.

"Sirius?"

She's grinning as her eyes go over the house, searching for him.

He steps around the corner.

She's somehow more beautiful than last he saw her. Sirius breathes for what feels like the first time in a year. His lungs expand with happiness.

She sees him, and her grin disappears, replaced by something far softer.

They look at each other.

A second. An eternity. Sirius can't get enough.

And then she's moving, and Sirius drops his wand just as she's jumping on him.

He catches her in his arms and promptly starts sobbing.

Blacks don't cry, but she's crying too, so that's alright.

"Is it true?" she asks, drawing back. "He said it is but-"

She takes his left arm and almost rips the sleeve in her haste.

Sirius finds it ugly. A mark of submission.

Bellatrix sees something else in it, because she smiles.

She hugs him again. "I always knew you'd see sense. I knew it! I told everyone, but they thought me crazy. I told them you are just young and rebellious."

She takes his face in her hands and presses kisses on his temples, on his nose, his lips.

"I always knew you'll come back to me."

Sirius had never considered how hard lying to Bella would be. Impossible, really. She'll see through him.

He only hoped he will see her again, he's been consumed with thoughts of having her beautiful eyes look at him with love again, so he hadn't contemplated anything else.

He panics a little, but for no reason.

She wants it so much to be true; she wants Sirius to have changed his mind, so she will dismiss any other concerns.

Similar to James. He, too, dismisses many things, refusing to see the darker side of Sirius.

Bella refuses to see the light.

"I missed you," he says, voice rough. That, at least, is true. "I did this for you." Also the truth, but not the full truth.

Deep inside, Sirius isn't sure why he went along with Dumbledore's plan.

"I know. I told the dark lord that he should be patient with you, as a favour to me. That you'll need time to see his greatness."

Sirius scoffs. "I'll need a lot of fucking time."

"He's amazing, you'll see. He's-"

"I don't want to talk about him."

Sirius doesn't want to see the adoration in her eyes that only used to be directed at him, when she speaks of that *git.*

It was the final blow that night two years before.

His father's illness, his mother's scorn, all the expectations placed on him, the fight with his uncle- and then he'd seen Bella's mark, he'd heard the passion in her voice when speaking of her lord, and Sirius left.

He couldn't bear it anymore.

Bella sighs, but she's exuberant, radiating happiness. It hurts him how beautiful she is. It makes him ache. Always did. It makes him want to lock her in a glass cage and keep her there, safe.

"Why are you living in this hovel?" Her delicate nose wrinkles as she looks around.

Sirius laughs. It's a three-bedroom, two-story house. Most wizards can afford something like it after years of slaving away at the Ministry.

Sirius still thinks it's a dump, of course, compared to where he comes from. But at least he's been living long enough with the *plebeians*, as his mother calls anyone that doesn't sleep on galleons, to recognise it is a nice house.

Bella hadn't.

"I'm poor," he smirks.

She shivers in pretend disgust. "Didn't Uncle Alphard leave you all his gold? Your mum blasted him off the tapestry for it."

Sirius snorts. "Dear ol' mum. In any case, after he spent his life drinking and whoring around, there's not that much left in his vault."

"I hear you are determined to follow in his footsteps."

"I learn by example."

She laughs, hugging him once more. "I can't believe I have you again."

You always had me. I was right here.

She's the one that refused to talk to him, that sent his letters back.

But Sirius doesn't say it; for once, he keeps his mouth shut.

He wouldn't have, had he been drunk.

Maybe Dumbledore is on to something with his stupid rules.

"You'll go back home, right?"

"No. Never," Sirius pulls back. "I'm not going back there."

"It's your home. That awful hag has no right to keep you out or to blast your name off-"

"Bella. I can't go back. I'm a spy. People on Dumbledore's side can't see me going back home."

"Ah," she frowns. "Yes. Well, then Rodolphus and I will give you gold-"

"I'm good."

"You live in poverty!"

Sirius laughs. "You really don't know what poverty looks like, Bella."

"Like this." She points to his empty walls, paint missing in several places. "It looks like this."

"Then you'll just have to accept me, poor as I am."

"Hmm," she wrinkles her nose again.

He takes her to the roof.

His mothers' screams, her father's hate never reached them there. The sky had always been their refuge.

Sirius and Bella aren't cowards. They stand their ground and fight back.

"Blacks don't back away. Blacks don't show fear," his father says, holding Sirius' chin firmly.

And yet, what are Blacks supposed to do when other Blacks wish them harm?

Who wins then? How does it end when no one backs off?

Once upon a time, Bella would carry him in her skinny arms, and they'd hide on the steep roof.

"Andy gets scared when I bring her here. Cissa cries. But you like it, don't you, Sirius? You like it here with me."

Eventually, they'd go up there even when they had grown old enough to have no fear, when the screams and the hate had become so mundane it didn't bother them anymore.

He'd tell her of his pranks at Hogwarts, and she'd talk about Lestrange, and he'd threaten to throw her off the roof if he has to hear about him one more time.

The sky is clearer seen from his small house in the neck of the woods than it ever was from Grimmauld, in London.

They lie on a transfigured blanket and look at the stars, naming each one, trying to get it right before the other does.

Eventually, they stop talking, and they just hold each other tightly, in silence.

It's worth it, he thinks. What he'll have to do, whatever it comes- having Bella close is worth everything.

For the first time in years, Sirius feels at home.

(-)

"You look good," James says, smiling. "Better than I've seen you in a while."

"Got my beauty sleep," Sirius winks. "Can't drink, can't get laid. Sleep is all there is."

James laughs. "We'll go out in the weekend, down to that Muggle pub you like."

Sirius nods, but he's so full of Bella he doesn't need anything else.

Lying to James will be hard, too.

But he can do it. He can do everything.

Sirius feels *optimistic.*

He even focuses on his next meeting with Dumbledore and listens patiently to what the old man says.

They go over a list of Order members, and Dumbledore decides who Sirius can out to Voldemort as belonging to their vigilante group, and who he can not.

"It will be a while before he even remotely trusts you around any other Death Eaters. But you're smart; he might make a reference, a detail could slip that will allow you to identify someone."

Obviously, he doesn't tell Dumbledore he'd spent the night hugging someone in Voldemort's inner circle.

(-)

"Why is he glaring at me?"

Peter rolls his eyes. "Because you're fucking his fiance."

"Oh. So it's Gideon. I thought it was Fabian."

He smirks at Prewett and gives him a little wave.

"Stop it! There's no need to antagonise him further. He'll end up cursing you."

Sirius laughs, loudly.

People at the closest tables turn their heads to look at him.

"They broke up," James says.

"Merlin, again?" Peter frowns. "I just saw them together… last week?

"Who can keep up? I can't. I can't be expected to know when she's his fiance and when she's not." Sirius smirks. "I have the best intentions and operate under the illusion she's not with him when she's in my bed."

"Yeah, sure." Remus' voice is dripping with sarcasm. "Like that time when you two sneaked out of Frank's and Alice's Christmas Party, even if she came with Gideon?"

"I did that?" Sirius raises a hand, signalling Tom that he'd like another glass of firewhiskey. "Well, that was wrong of me."

"Here you go, Mr. Black," Tom says, coming with the glass.

Tom likes Sirius.

He tips very well. The drunker he gets, the more outrageous his tips get.

"Why do you let him call you Mr. Black?" Remus asks.

"Because it's my name," Sirius says, harsher than he'd wanted.

Silence falls.

"I only meant, it's too formal. He calls us by our first names and-" Remus tries, jaws tense.

"I don't know, Remus." Sirius downs his glass in one go. "Maybe because I think of him as a lowly servant that should bow for me as I throw money at him. Is that what you want me to tell you?"

"Merlin, Sirius!" James hisses. "Stop it!"

Peter moves on his chair, looking between all of them.

Sirius stands. He already feels guilty for snapping, but the anger is still there.

"I'm heading out."

"Padfoot-" James stands too, but Sirius doesn't give him the time to come after him.

He walks fast towards the door that will lead him right to muggle London.

He bumps into Gideon, standing with his Hit Patrol mates at the end of the pub.

Sirius can pretend it's accidental, the way he forcefully slams his shoulder into the other man, but he's too angry to lie to himself.

"My apologies, *cousin*. I didn't see you," he says, as hostile as he can.

When Sirius left Hogwarts, and he was so alone if James wasn't with him, Gideon would drag Sirius along when they met at pubs, introducing Sirius as "my little cousin."

Sirius instantly, viciously hated him.

Cousin. How dare he? Just because Sirius's aunt married a Prewett didn't mean Gideon and Sirius were anything to each other.

He grew up with his *real* cousins, he loved his real cousins, and he did not appreciate this strange red-headed idiot trying to replace them.

A vein throbs on Gideon's forehead.

"He's not worth it," one of the other Patrollers says.

"Ignore him; he's drunk and looking for a fight," another one is quick to add, laying a hand on Gideon's shoulder.

"Gods, but you're a paranoid bunch," Sirius drawls in his poshest accent. "I honestly didn't see the man; not my fault he's so *short*."

Gideon's hand goes for his wand, and Sirius *thrills* with anticipation.

One of the men steps between them, and suddenly James is also there, interfering with Sirius' fun.

The pub is silent, everyone looking at them.

Sirius changes his mind, turning for the Diagon Alley exit instead. People are fast to get out of his path.

As soon as he's out, he Apparates.

The house he strolls towards is truly small. Poor, indeed. Bella wouldn't be caught dead inside it.

He kicks a garden gnome on his way to the door.

Marlene opens it some seconds later.

"Black, I have to wake up in two hours-"

Sirius kisses her, pushing her inside the house.

"And this strapping young lad is my little cousin, Sirius," Gideon says, introducing him to Marlene. "This is my fiance, Mar."

He pus a hand over her shoulder, drawing her closer to him.

"We know each other," Marlene says.

"Well, yeah, I assumed your time at Hogwarts overlapped for some years," Gideon laughs. "But I figure you wouldn't have interacted much back then."

"Not much," Sirius says.

She'd been Head Girl, and he'd been a fourteen-year-old troublemaker.

Their paths crossed here and there. Head Girl options must have been slim that year because he will never know how she ended up in the position.

She always let the Marauders get away with everything. And not only them, really.

Sometimes they'd catch her snogging the Head Boy, while she was supposed to be on patrol to make sure no students were out of bed.

Later that evening, Sirius overhears Gideon talking to her.

"I'm trying to look after him; Dumbledore told me Sirius is having a rough time. And my mum said he must miss his family. She missed her parents and brother when they stopped talking to her. You know how Blacks are about family. So I'm trying to make the lad feel better. We can be his family. Our parents are siblings, after all."

"I ran into your darling Gideon," Sirius snarls between rough kisses.

Marlene draws away. "If you hurt him-" she says, threatening.

"I don't need to hurt him, love. You do that fine on your own."

"Fuck you!"

Sirius pushes her into the wall. "Nah, I'll be fucking you," he says, crowding her.

He pins her arms over her head, just so she won't get any ideas of pulling off his shirt.

Some ten minutes later, breathing hard in the cramped, narrow space that serves as an entry hall, Sirius closes his eyes, the anger drained out of him.

"Let him go. You're not good for him. He deserves better."

Gideon was too good for Sirius, too.

Sirius couldn't stand his kindness, couldn't stand his pity. Sirius was jealous - Gideon had Black blood, but he also had a brother and a sister; he had his mum and dad, a respected career. No one glared at him; no one was suspicious.

Gideon had no business walking around with Sirius' blood in his veins but escaping the madness that Sirius inherited.

"You think I don't know?" Marlene whispers. "I'm trying, but he keeps coming back. And I'm a selfish bitch, I like those moments when it's good when I can pretend we'll marry and have a family and grow old."

She curls around Sirius. "But then I remember I won't grow old. I'll grow bitter, I'll grow meaner, but not much older."

Marlene is as self-destructive as Sirius is. A kindred soul.

Misery loves company.

"You're already mean and bitter," he says.

"I love you," she whispers.

He trails his fingers over the giant phoenix tattooed on her side. It moves its fiery wings, lashes its tail.

"I thought I'd say it before I wake up with some Death Eaters on my doorstep."

She touches the smaller phoenix he has on his left hip. She can't see it, but she knows where it is, pushing it with her fingers through his shirt.

They got pissed, months before, and decided it would be a grand thing to have matching tattoos.

"Don't let Gid bury me in one of those flowery, demure dresses he likes. Dress me in my black dragonhide leather dress. I want to look sexy; if they leave my body intact, that is."

Sirius snorts.

"There's no way you're dying first." He opens his eyes and turns to her. "And you look a right fright in the leather dress. You have no curves. It just sticks to your bones."

"You're such a prat!" Marlene says, but she is amused. "Promise me; the black leather dress."

"Fine," he says. "With your red shoes, the ones with the spikes on the heel?"

"You have a good eye for fashion, Black. What about you? What would you like for yourself?"

"Naked," Sirius declares, making her groan.

(-)

Sirius expected it to hurt. It doesn't. He feels a pull, centred in his left forearm, a sort of itch that he wouldn't be able to scratch.

Here we go, Sirius thinks, heart in his throat.

Voldemort is apparently polite.

It's seven o'clock in the evening, on a Tuesday.

Not too late, not early. Slim chances of Sirius being in someone's bed or wasted in some pub.

As it happenes, he is on his bike, returning from dinner with Peter and his mum.

He almost crashes into a car when he feels it.

He pulls on the side of the road, casts a discrete camouflage spell at the bike and hurries to a side street.

When he Apparates, he finds himself outside of a cabin, in a forest.

Sirius takes in his surroundings as fast as he can, looking for distinctive marks that could help him find it later. Nothing stands out.

Except- well, it's already night outside, in full winter. And so far from a city, the stars are bright, the sky clear.

Sirius is very good at Astronomy.

He's been watching the night sky since he was a child.

Later, when he can get his hands on parchment and ink, he'll be able to know a general location, just based on how the stars look from where he's standing.

He smiles to himself, pleased.

Bet you didn't think of this, mighty dark lord.

But then he's forced to consider his next move. Should he wait outside? Should he enter the cabin?

Should he knock?

He hates feeling insecure. He hates having to walk on eggshells around anyone.

So this is how people feel around me, he thinks.

Fuck it. Sirius Black doesn't walk on eggshells. He stomps on them. Loudly.

So he walks to the door and opens it, with no more hesitation.

It's as empty as his house.

There's a table in the centre of it, four chairs and not much else.

"Bella comes here?" he asks, eyebrow raised. Even more surprising- *Lucius?* The man who once sneered at Nott's three thousand galleons curtains because they were 'shabby'?

Voldemort is already occupying one of the chairs.

Head of the table, of course.

"No," he answers.

"I see. The glamorous Death Eaters get more fancy locations."

Merlin, can you keep your mouth shut?

If only; Sirius wouldn't be in such trouble if he could. He'd be home at Grimmauld, sneering at poor people or something like that.

Dumbledore guessed correctly. If Voldemort is annoyed with Sirius' lack of reverence, he doesn't show it. He'll play nice, for now.

"We shall see if, with time, you will get access to those locations. Sit."

I'm not a fucking dog. Thankfully, he doesn't say it.

But I am a dog, he thinks, and he laughs.

Voldemort doesn't have a reaction to that, either. He simply watches Sirius as he takes a seat.

The one *closest* to Voldemort. Only cowards would choose the one that would place him further away.

He must be used to Bella, Sirius thinks. She laughs like a lunatic, too.

And then nothing.

Voldemort just sits there, made of marble.

You should join Dumbledore in the club of Men With Piercing Eyes, Sirius thinks. *You can go to the park and creep people out every Sunday at six o'clock.*

He stares back.

"What did Dumbledore have to say about your mark?"

Oh, he found it as ridiculous looking as I do.

"He said he didn't expect it to happen so soon." Sirius keeps his tone neutral.

He feels like he's snitching, even if Dumbledore is fully aware of what Sirius is doing.

Still, it isn't pleasant.

And Sirius will have to choose for himself in some matters. Voldemort might ask a question that Dumbledore hadn't thought of before, and then Sirius will have to decide what and how much to say-

"How was your week?" Voldemort asks, and indeed, that was not a question Sirius and Dumbledore went over in their meetings.

"Boring," he says.

Voldemort doesn't blink. How is that possible?

"You do not strike me as boring."

"I've my moments."

Voldemort seems to expect more.

"I painted my walls," Sirius offers. "The muggle way. Now that's boring."

"Why not use magic?"

"I wanted to have something to do."

A muggle once told Sirius he clearly has anger issues and he should work them off at "the gym."

These muggles… Sirius found out what a gym was, and he'd spent hours watching men and women, closed in a cramped room, running on machines, riding fake bikes, lifting blocks of weights.

Instead of just running out in the park, getting a real bike.

Lift something else, something that needed lifting.

But Sirius remembers the advice, and when he gets itchy, he busies himself with an inane task, to take his mind off violence.

"Wine?" Voldemort says, and two goblets appear on the table, already filled with wine.

Why ask if you won't give me options?

"Dumbledore said you don't drink."

"Dumbledore likes to thinks he knows me very well," Voldemort says. "In reality, he'd known me as a school boy. Of course I didn’t drink back then.”

Sirius snorts. "*Of course?* The only good thing about the seventh year was the parties."

"I was a *good* student," Voldemort says.

"Bet you were a Head Boy."

Sirius will start looking for Head Boys, from the early nine hundreds to his time at Hogwarts.

Voldemort doesn't answer, taking a sip of his wine. Sirius notices the ring on his finger.

A black stone, set in heavy gold. There's a symbol on it, but Sirius doesn't have the time to focus on it. Not if he wants to be discrete, at least.

Sirius takes out a bezoar from his pocket and swallows it with the wine.

It makes Voldemort smile.

"If I meant to poison you, I'd go with something that wouldn't be helped much by a bezoar."

Sirius shrugs. The wine is of quality, even if it is not his preferred beverage.

"Bella told me you are good with potions."

Sirius wonders what else Bella told him. He hates imagining them talking about him.

"In a pinch," Sirius answers.

"Come, now. I thought you wear your arrogance like a shield. Don't play modest."

Don't tell me what to do! The Black blood screams.

Sirius grits his teeth, keeps it all in.

"Eight N.E.W.Ts, four of them Outstanding."

"Merlin, really?" Sirius snaps. "You got my grades?"

"I've taken an interest in you."

Clearly.

"And I don't even know your name. How rude. Dumbledore still won't tell me."

"I am sure he did," Voldemort says.

"No. He calls you Voldemort."

"That *is* my name. Pity he refuses to use it to my face."

I'll find out, have no worries.

"That Dumbledore… he refuses to call me 'Padfoot', too, though I insist on it."

"An odd nickname."

"I'm an odd man."

Voldemort smiles. "Far from it."

That sounds like an insult.

"So, should I call you Voldemort, then?" Sirius pokes the beast because he can't help it.

It's mum's fault, the way I turned up. It must be.

Lily always says he sleeps around because he has unresolved 'mummy issues'.

"Are you implying I want to fuck my mother?" Sirius had demanded, outraged.

"*Lord* Voldemort."

Not "my lord" then. Not yet, at least. Which makes sense. Sirius can't imagine Bella or Rodolphus, even Lucius, bowing down and calling anyone 'my lord' from the get-go.

Still silly. *Lord.* Sirius thinks to make a jape, how Voldemort despises muggles and yet uses a muggle title.

But he doesn't want to provoke him quite that badly.

"If I were you, I wouldn't stop at lord. Why not king? Emperor Voldemort."

"An idea for the future," Voldemort says, mildly, taking another sip.

Sirius gets another look at the ring.

A House ring; Sirius once had one himself, with his family's coat of arms.

This one has the Deathly Hallows symbol on it, he can recognise it now. *Did he invent a new Noble House?*

The Sacred Twenty Nine sounds just as stupid as the Sacred Twenty Eight.

"Why 'Padfoot'? What does it mean?"

"Oh," Sirius waves it away. "A childish thing. Came up with it at *sixteen*."

"You truly don't have any sense of self-preservation, do you?"

"Not an ounce."

"Your father was like that."

A sharp pain blossoms between his ribs. No one mentions his father. Few mention his mother to his face, but no one *ever* mentions his father.

Not even his family.

Sirius takes a big breath.

"My father hated you."

"Unlikely," Voldemort comments. "Orion Black was too cold for something as passionate as hate."

"My father," Sirius hisses, choked. "Is off-limits."

Voldemort raises an eyebrow. "Do I have to tell you, or you figured it out?"

"Got it," Sirius snarls.

Leave jabs at his names aside, and Voldemort won't go into painful territory in return.

"Good." He leans back into the chair.

It's a dingy old thing.

Voldemort makes it look like a throne.

"This will be a long game, Sirius. Dumbledore is old. He lacks creativity, goes by the formula. Soldiers on the ground die. And he and I get to play chess. An open double spy, the most used tactic in war. That way, we can feed each other pieces of information. Everyone wins a little; no one really loses."

"It does sound stupid, I agree."

Voldemort doesn't like being interrupted. A muscle twitches in his jaw, but he quickly gets it under control.

"I hate wasting time. And it will take time before I can trust you. I have no interest in whatever information Dumbledore wants me to get from you."

"Then?"

"Then we shall move to the *practical* side. I promised you I will teach you dark magic, did I not? We shall do that until you grow bored and disillusioned with Dumbledore."

"I am already disillusioned with him."

Voldemort laughs.

There's something off about him, now that Sirius can properly look without fear of impending death.

He isn't sure what. Not the eyes, though those are off by themselves.

Something about his face just doesn't seem right. On their own, all his features are normal. But together, they speak of former beauty, of experiences that had tarnished it, diminished it to something both mundane but also unique, at the same time.

"You will find me more to your taste."

Will I?

"You didn't tell Dumbledore about Bella. You know she is a Death Eater, you'd known for years. She tells me you must know about Lucius and the Lestrange brothers as well."

"I do."

Voldemort regards him in silence, his long fingers taping against the goblet.

"Your heart is *here*. And the rest of you will follow, eventually."

Chapter End Notes

I know flashbacks can be annoying, and I promise they won't be there much longer than a few chapter, to flesh out some of the other characters in the story.
If you have the time, I would love to hear your thoughts on this chapter.
Thank you for reading!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Got you," Sirius exclaims, victorious, when he finally finds the cabin, after four nights of searching around the general area. He refused to sleep, gripped by an obsessive need to figure it out.

He rarely cares about anything enough to dedicate so much of his time, but on the rare occasions that sometimes gets his interest, Sirius will not tire until it's done with. He'd been the same with the Animagus process and with the Marauder's Map.

The stars never fail him.

Sirius stands in the small clearing, surrounded by miles upon miles of thick trees.

He does nothing as foolish as trying to get inside the cabin. There's nothing there for him to find, anyway.

(-)

Dumbledore, to his credit, doesn't look put upon when Sirius knocks on his office door well after midnight. He doesn't even ask Sirius how he sneaked inside the castle undetected.

He probably remembers the Marauders were great at sneaking around.

He looks alert, even if he is in his nightgown, which wasn't a sight Sirius ever wished to see.

"I know where Voldemort will be next Tuesday," Sirius tells him, stepping inside the office. "I told you last time we met at a cabin-"

"Yes."

Dumbledore invites him wordlessly to sit. A cup of tea appears on the desk.

Sirius scoffs at it, pushing it aside.

"And he said we will meet again there next Tuesday, when he calls me."

“Yes.”

“Found the cabin.”

Dumbledore blinks at him. “How?”

“Stars,” Sirius says, and Dumbledore frowns but then possibly remembers Sirius’ Outstanding in Astronomy N.E.W.T and his teacher going on an on about him, because his face clears.

“That’s very creative of you.”

Dumbledore sits just as Fawkes shows up from somewhere. He’s in his best form, far from birth but far from dying, too, magnificent, vibrant.

He perches himself on Dumbledore’s shoulder and looks at Sirius with interest.

“So, what are we going to do?” Sirius asks.

“Nothing.” Dumbledore doesn’t even hesitate. Sirius can’t say he’s disappointed. He’d sort of expected it.

Frustrating none the less. There must have been many times during the years when Dumbledore knew exactly where to find Voldemort, the most wanted man in the country.

And he did nothing.

“Why not? Everyone says he’s afraid of you. That means you are the superior duellist, no? So why not face him, head on, if you know where he’ll be?”

Dumbledore takes a long time to answer, leaning back into his chair, carefully considering Sirius.

“I might lose.”

Sirius appreciates the honesty.

Dumbledore has a reputation as the most gifted man alive; well deserved after famously defeating Grindelwald and inventing or discovering all sorts of new magical theories.

And while when he’s angry, a rare enough occurrence, Sirius can feel the power radiating from him, it’s…not the same as being in Voldemort’s presence.

Sirius understands looks can be deceiving, but Voldemort appears far more capable.

Dumbledore aged gracefully, but he *aged*.

Voldemort, who can’t be a spring chicken either, has an ageless quality to him, a threatening energy clinging to him like a second skin.

“If even our famous dark lord defeater might lose to Voldemort…” Sirius says, a little taunting colouring his words.

“Grindelwald and Voldemort are very different people.” Dumbledore’s eyes look glazed for a second, as if lost in the past. “They are both ambitious and power hungry but all similarities end there. I’ve seen Voldemort duel, and even when he was but a young lad in Duelling Club, he had a particular style to him that is very hard to counter.”

Oh, Sirius knows. With a thrill, he remembers the duel from his house, and the one from Tuesday.

He doesn’t have words to describe how Voldemort fights.

Dumbledore does, however. He has words for everything.

“It looks chaotic, but it isn’t. There is order in that chaos, deliberation behind every seemingly baffling choice he makes. Impossible to predict his moves. I’ve seen him fight by the rules, with elegance and poise, and I’ve seen him in a rage, with no concern for etiquette. He is a phenomenal wizard and I can not be certain of the outcome of a direct confrontation. Too much would be left to chance.”

Sirius imagines another world, a better world where the consequences of a fight between these two forces of nature wouldn’t be the end of their magical society as they know it. In that world, he’d like to see that duel.

“He doesn’t fear me as people think,” Dumbledore says. "I do not believe he’s actually concerned I would best him in combat. His pride would not allow for that thought to be given much consideration.”

“Than how does he fear you?”

Dumbledore takes even longer to answer this question.

“He doesn’t feel comfortable in my presence. It reminds him of who he used to be.”

Who was he? Who *is* he? But Sirius had asked enough time, and he’d been ignored.

“It reminds him that once he was a child, under my authority.”

“Yeah, that’s no fun for anyone to remember,” Sirius says, perhaps unkindly.

But he hates that office. The chair he’s sitting in, in which he’d found himself so many times, being berated for one thing or another.

And he knows most of those times, Dumbledore went easy on him.

Not on the almost murder, though.

Of course he didn’t. You almost killed someone. What did you expect him to do, give you flowers?

Still, Sirius likes to think there were three parties to blame in that complete mess.

Snape, Sirius and Dumbledore, albeit indirectly.

Dumbledore ignored Snape and his fellow budding Death Eaters, even as basically everyone in the castle knew they were dealing with Dark Magic and were having plans to join Voldemort as soon as they were done with school.

But Dumbledore likes to ignore Slytherins. Sirius imagines it is easier for him- and everyone else- to write the snakes off as hopeless cases.

And then there's the way Dumbledore treats Gryffindors, so vastly different. As a thirteen, fourteen-year-old, Sirius was happy for the blatant favouritism.

It left McGonagall, Head of the Lions, to be impartial between Gryffindor- Slytherin feuds, what with Dumbledore and Slughorn being no help at all.

The Headmaster was happy to turn a blind eye to the brewing tensions between the Marauders and some of the Slytherins boys, the more and more sinister curses flying between them.

And then, on *that* night, Dumbledore came down on Snape and Sirius like a hurricane.

Sirius doubts Dumbledore ever glanced at Snape before.

As for Sirius, even when his pranks got dangerous, Dumbledore often overturned McGonagall harsher punishments, because "they are just boys having fun".

Sirius remembers a moment, in that very office, not an hour after it all came to a head, sitting with Snape beside him.

Snape was shaking, eyes wide, skin pale.

Sirius was still, eyes narrowed, blood hot.

And Dumbledore punishing them both.

"That's not fair," Snape yelled, strangled. "That's not fair! He almost killed me and we get the same punishment? You hid a werewolf in this school and you threaten to expel me if I ever tell anyone?"

For a moment, Sirius truly saw his side. It really wasn't fair.

But then he remembered just with whom he was agreeing with and quickly lost all compassion.

"You already knew he was a werewolf, you slimy piece of shit! You knew! I just told you how to go there, and you had to do it, didn't you? You wanted to have Remus expelled, and you needed proof. I gave you proof. Stop whining!" Sirius rages, before turning to Dumbledore.

"McGonagall told you for ages this git was messing with dark magic, that he was obsessed with us, following us around beyond the point of-"

"And I told Slughorn he and Potter curse me every chance they get!" Snape yells at Dumbledore too.

"Because you are always there, hovering around! We wouldn't get to curse you so often if you weren't literally right behind us!" Sirius snarls at him.

Snape stands, his unwashed hair falling in his face. "Brave Gryffindors, four against one and you did nothing, Headmaster-"

"Four against one? Are you seeing double? What four? It's me and James. And I can take you on my own, I assure you-"

"In your dreams, Black-"

Naturally, Sirius pulled out his wand and cursed him.

Dumbledore did act then, diverting the curse before it hit Snape. And then he'd kicked Snape out of the office, so he could deal with them, one at a time.

The only reason Sirius hadn't been expelled was because Dumbledore would have to give a reason for it. And that would out Remus to the world, get him expelled too and also get Dumbledore in quite some trouble.

All in all, that night, surprisingly, had given Sirius and Snape something in common. A resentfulness towards Dumbledore that is hard to shake off.

"Anyway," Sirius says, to get past the awkward pause. "Shouldn't we at least try to get rid of him, if we have the chance?"

"If I die," Dumbledore says, "you'll forgive me for saying it, but there will be no one good enough left to protect our country from Voldemort."

And he calls Sirius arrogant.

But he's right, of course he is. Without Dumbledore, they're fucked.

"Voldemort is not the kind of enemy to defeat in combat, Sirius. His knowledge and use of magic is unparalleled. In order to stop him, we need to use our brains, not our brawn."

"My, my. So we need to be Slytherin about it, is what you're saying," Sirius spits.

Fawkes chirps, and Dumbledore raises a hand to scratch under his beak.

"Luckily, you have plenty Slytherin in you," Dumbledore says, and his gaze moves to the sorting hat, displayed on a shelf.

Sirius turns to stare at the hat as well.

He wonders is the sorting is truly a private matter or if the bloody thing snitches on students to Dumbledore.

(-)

Gaunt.

No wonder Sirius didn't know what to make of Voldemort's hideous ring.

But it kept bugging him, he wanted to know who would take the Deathly Hallows as coat of arms so he decided to check.

And there it is, under the Gaunt name, in a list of the Sacred Twenty Eight. It used to belong to the Peverell family, but after it went extinct in the male line, the Gaunts took it for themselves.

They hadn't had a presence in the Wizengamot for centuries, never mind society functions in Sirius' youth. He couldn't have remembered it.

Gaunt, he thinks, looking at the page in **"Lineage most pure: A history of Wizarding Excellence"**. Salazar Slytherin is at the top of the family tree.

Of course! There were rumours Voldemort was the Heir of Slytherin, that he's a Parselmouth.

He could only be a Gaunt.

Sirius should have guessed it sooner. Only he always hated this Sacred Twenty Eight business and the Gaunts had truly fallen off the face of the earth, their legacy and bizarre snake language forgotten.

Morfin Gaunt and Merope Gaunt are the last ones, Sirius reads.

Neither have dates of death, but the book hadn't been updated since 1928, so they could or could not be alive.

Naturally, one of them must be Voldemort's parent.

But that doesn't get him any closer to a name, to who Voldemort is and why his mum called him a mudblood.

"Figures I'd find you here," a voice pulls Sirius out of his thoughts. "Why are you reading that crap? Reminding yourself of your superiority?"

Gideon. Of course Gideon would find Sirius in Knockturn Alley, reading the Blood Purist Holy Book.

“Checking if my mum is my first cousin or my second,” Sirius says.

People always aim to insult him with the rampant incest in his family, so Sirius likes to bring it up before they can.

Snape loved to call him an inbreed, as if that’s any worse than half-blood.

Sirius doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with it.

Only Blacks are worthy of carrying Black children.

And whom better to marry than someone you grew up with, someone that shares the same family values?

At least it spares people of the awkward “bringing my boyfriend to meet my parents” type of dinner.

“I’m just making sure Marlene’s blood is pure enough so we can start procreating,” he says viciously and Gideon’s face transforms with rage.

But he’s there in Hit Wizard Uniform, clearly on the job since he’s not one to visit Knockturn for pleasure.

“And, oh, look! What a surprise! She is pure enough.” Sirius slams the book shut. “I’ll send you an invitation to the wedding. We are family, after all. Don’t be bitter, now. I’m sure you understand. She was attracted to the little Black blood you have in you, but then I came along and… really, you can’t blame her.”

Sirius waits for a second, just in case Gideon decides to be reckless, for once. To take out his wand and curse Sirius.

He doesn’t.

“You’re the worst thing that could have happened to her,” Gideon says, fists clenched at his side.

“Possibly. You, however, are entirely forgettable. Good day, *cousin.*”

The next Order meeting will be tense, that’s for sure.

(-)

“What the fuck?”

Sirius stops in the hallway of his house, half convinced he’d somehow ended up in another place by mistake.

The house-elves tremble, bowed so low, their heads touch the floor.

The very *clean* floor.

The place looks nothing like how it did in the morning when he left it.

"Mistress Lestrange sent us, sir. *'Make it a home or die,'* Mistress said."

"Merlin's fucking balls!"

His walls, just pained, are painted *again*. But that's the least of it.

Furniture. Solid wood, expensive looking.

The cushions on his tall, extravagant couch alone would cost as much as the house.

"Fuck it, carry on, then." There is no stopping deranged house-elves on a mission.

There is no stopping Bella.

"Would sir like something to eat?"

"I've no food in the-"

"You do now, sir."

Indeed, his kitchen, when he enters it, is fully equipped.

It used to be a muggle house, but it isn't anymore. The house-elves expanded parts of it. Sirius has a cellar now. With some of Lestrange's collection wines chilling inside.

"Tell Lestrange I'm going to fuck Muggles on his precious furniture," Sirius says, vexed to receive anything from anyone.

He's not a charity case.

The house-elves freeze.

"I was joking," Sirius snaps at them. "Get out of my sight!"

They scurry out of the already finished living room.

He has an office, too, like all important men must have.

Intimidating desk, all black wood, with basically a throne to serve as chair, the Black coat of arms carved on it.

Underneath it, **Toujours Pur**, in neat calligraphy.

A few fine raven quills are arranged nicely on top of it, besides an ink pot made of gold.

Bella was never one to take an interest in anything domestic- it was always Narcissa that dreamed of decorating a manor and managing its upkeep.

Yet he can recognise Bella's style in every chamber.

His bedroom is one of the rooms that got magically enlarged, he's quite certain of it.

The bed is magnificent.

Could host an orgy. Sirius never had one of those, at least not from what he remembers, but he plans on it.

Now he also has a dressing room, which exasperates him and amuses him in equal amounts.

The elves didn't throw away his Muggle clothing. They ironed his jeans and his Queen T-shirts, folded them neatly at the very back of a massive armoire. His leather jackets are hanging in the back as well, behind the robes.

Sirius runs his fingers over the new robes, the expensive material familiar to his touch.

Sometimes, Sirius wakes up with tears in his eyes, remembering big manors, with servants running after him, at his beck and call. A little brother following him around everywhere he goes.

A delicate blonde girl drawing a picture by a lake.

Another girl, with brown hair, playing the violin.

A black-haired girl, brewing potions that would make the dark lord tremble.

He remembers laughter, large ballrooms filled with elegance. Powerful men sharing cigars over the finest firewhiskey drank from crystal goblets; women gossiping over tea, in fancy dresses, not a hair out of place.

He dreams of a beautiful woman, with long straight black hair and striking grey eyes holding a hand to his forehead as he suffers with dragon pox. He remembers her voice, singing him lullabies, all night and all day, tirelessly.

He remembers her fighting for his life; he remembers her smell- lavender and love.

Sirius has nightmares of that woman turning into a bitter harpy, always screaming.

"You are no son of mine!"

Sirius dreams of his jewellery, of gleaming diamonds and heavy gold.

He wakes up with the weight of the Black ring on his finger, even if it is not there anymore.

He takes his hand away from the robes, a painful feeling in his chest.

You left all that behind. You don't miss it.

But now he's besieged by finery again.

Bella gave him the robes and the gold cufflinks and expensive watches, all skilfully arranged in a drawer.

She can't give him back his mother, however. His father and brother.

Bella can wrap him in the finest silk, but she can't wrap him in the security, the cocoon of a strong, large family.

(-)

"Gideon is telling people he found you in Knockturn, in a shady shop, reading wizarding excellence nonsense."

James looks at Sirius, eyebrow raised.

He's sprawled on the couch beside his wife. The house in Godric's Hallow is coming along nicely.

"All shops are shady in Knockturn," Sirius answers.

Lily snorts.

"Do you *have* to go there?" James asks.

"It's a compulsion," Sirius says, smiling. "Every week, it calls to me. It's the hags, I admit. I have weird sexual fantasies."

James laughs, shaking his head.

"Anyway, it's just Gideon and his jealousy. I just warned you so you know he's saying those things."

"Thanks, mate."

"Oh, dinner should be ready, I think." James checks his watch and hurries to the kitchen.

He'd been threatening Sirius with a home cooked meal for weeks.

Cooked by *himself*; Sirius is a brave man, but he's afraid of how that will turn up.

But James departs with a spring to his step, whistling.

Leaving Sirius with Lily and her lovely eyes searching his features.

"Why do you do that?"

“Sit here and look pretty?”

“Reading that shit, saying those things to Prewett… why?”

“It’s what he expects to hear.”

Lily shakes her head. “Grow up, Sirius. They expected me to act like a muggle when I came to school. Some still do. But I don’t. I will always have to prove myself, no matter how long I live here. Blood Purists made sure of that. Should I just walk around in muggle clothes, use muggle expressions, throw it in everyone’s face?”

Sirius shrugs. “That’s what I’d do.”

“And what would it accomplish?”

Well, there’s the satisfaction of doing things out of spite, but Sirius doesn’t mention it.

“I’m done proving myself, Lily. You have the patience of saints. But at least you are not surrounded by those that think you less. Your friends don’t judge you by your blood.”

Lily gets off the couch and comes to sit on the armrest of the armchair Sirius is occupying.

“The Order- they should be on my side. Yet they judge me. So, fuck it. I’ll give them what they want. They expect a Black, that’s what they’ll get.”

Lily takes his hand. “Anyone that truly knows you, realises you are not a blood purist. No matter what you are found reading in Knockturn. But you don’t allow people close enough to know you. So…”

“I don’t care about people. I care about you and James, Peter and Remus.” He snorts. “And Remus would tend to agree with the likes of Prewett-”

“He doesn’t.”

“Oh, yeah, he does.”

Remus grows more distrustful of Sirius as the months pass by. It’s not easy for either of them.

It’s not easy for Remus, who loves Sirius, but he’s been cautious around him since the Snape incident.

It’s not easy for Sirius to watch suspicion grow in those amber eyes, mixing with the affection that is still there, corrupting it.

It’s not easy for James and Peter, always trying just a bit too hard to pretend all is fine in their group.

Lily opens her mouth, but James calls out from the kitchen.

“Love, I think I fucked it up.” He sounds disappointed.

Lily sighs. “What a shock.”

“Go on, grab your coat, I’m taking you out to eat,” Sirius says, standing.

“Are we taking James with us?” Lily asks, grinning and linking her arm with Sirius’ elbow.

“If he begs nicely,” Sirius answers.

(-)

Sirius waits the entire Tuesday outside the cabin in the woods.

He shouldn’t. He shouldn’t show Voldemort that Sirius so easily discovered the location.

It is sure to make him more prudent in the future.

But Sirius can’t help himself. He can’t help showing off.

He won’t wait for him to call Sirius, to compel him to Apparate there. He’s not a house-elf to be summoned. He’d hate that.

You can’t avoid it.

But he’s determined to avoid it for as long as he can.

When Voldemort pops out of thin air and sees Sirius already there-

His face morphs into surprise.

Sirius smiles, nonchalantly.

“I hear you like being waited on, *my lord.*”

Voldemort recovers fast. He walks closer to Sirius.

In the daylight, Sirius can see that his eyes are actually mostly brown.

A dark brown, with red scattered all through it.

He considers Sirius for some seconds.

Sirius shrugs, throwing his cigarette on the ground, stepping on it.

Voldemort is too proud to ask how he'd found the cabin.

His eyes keep moving to the surrounding area, as if trying to find some clue he had ignored before, something that would have tipped Sirius off.

But he doesn't ask.

"Impressed?" Sirius asks with a smirk.

"Hardly."

(-)

"Impressed?" Voldemort asks, an hour later, mockingly.

Sirius can't answer, because he can't breathe. Who knew learning dark magic from a dark lord would be *painful*?

It's hard to be elegant without air, but Sirius refuses to collapse, to make a spectacle of himself, writing on the floor or clutching at his neck.

He waits, controlling the anxiety, and indeed, shortly air comes back to him.

"Hardly," he spits back.

But Sirius is impressed.

Power always thrilled him, though he won't ever say it.

It reminds him of his father. Of long years when Sirius thought his father was the most powerful man in the world, that nothing was impossible to him.

It made Sirius feels so safe at his side.

"My wand," he snaps and Voldemort throws it back to him.

Before meeting Voldemort, Sirius had never been disarmed in his life.

Dark Magic truly is mighty. Such a refined form of magic. So compelling and decisive.

He'd been hit with many curses, twisted and complicated and unknown to him. They leave no trace on the outside, but they eat him from the inside.

Voldemort ends them with a wave of his wand.

Fuck, but he's… there's not even a word for what Voldemort is.

Everything, from his duelling stance, to the swift movement of his wand, to the way he just knew everything Sirius was about to do…

“Than I shall strive to be more impressive, next time,” Voldemort says, a smile playing on his lips. “Hard to please a Black; I know from experience.”

“Impossible to please a Black,” Sirius corrects him.

“I accomplished more hopeless tasks in my life.”

Sirius feels fine; more than fine. He’s achy and tired, but there is no true damage.

There’s only that buzz, perverse but sweet, that always comes with dark magic.

The potent call of greatness.

Sirius walks towards Voldemort, only stops when he reaches him.

He makes a mental note to wear his biker boots next time, that have a bit of heel to them. With those on, they should be of a height.

“The stars,” he drawls, pointing to the sky. “That’s how I found this place.” After such humiliating defeat, he wants to remind both of them that Sirius won something, too. “I can always find my way in the dark.”

Under the moon, with magic flowing out of him in waves, Voldemort’s eyes are back to red.

“As all dark creatures can,” he answers softly.

(-)

“I heard we’re getting married,” Marlene says, when he parks the bike in front of his house, after picking her up from her shift at St. Mungo’s. “And we’re having a little one?”

“Keep dreaming, McKinnon.”

“That’s not a dream. That’s a nightmare,” she says as they walk to the front door.

Sirius laughs.

“I told Hestia that no, you’d never tell Gideon you’ll marry me-” Marlene goes on.

“Thank you-”

“I told her you’d never marry me. Because of that squib I have way back in my family, that ran off and married a muggle. Big no-no for extremists like you.”

She grins at him.

“That will help my reputation,” Sirius says and her grin only widens.

Marlene is not a beauty; not in the traditional sense, at least. Or perhaps Sirius can’t think of women as beautiful anymore, since none hold a candle to his Bella.

He grew up with her, Andromeda and Narcissa.

Hard to find anyone beautiful after that.

Marlene’s too tall, too skinny. Too sharp.

She is pretty, he supposes, under the heavy makeup she wears.

But there’s something about her- her wildness, her hidden grace, the passion in her eyes, the twist to her blood-red lips; the freedom in her always messed up hair. The sleepless nights in the eyeliner that smudges around her eyes.

Sirius had many conventionally lovely women in his bed. And none attract him quite as she does.

“What in Morgana’s name happened to this place?” She stares around his living room once they reach it.

“Wait till you see the bedroom.” Sirius discards his jacket on one of the couches.

She narrows her eyes. “What brought this on?”

“The marriage thing; if I am to become a husband, I need a proper house, with dishes and towels and… stuff.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re so weird, Black.”

“Thank you.”

“Still got booze, right?”

“Oh, you shall be wonderfully pleased with the collection.”

They get drunk on two hundred-year-old firewhsikey, poured in silver goblets, slouched on his new Persian carpet.

But no matter how drunk he is, Sirius makes sure to remember the shirt stays on, covering his left forearm.

“Toujours Pur,” she slurs, finger tracing the letters on the goblet.

“That’s me,” he answers with a hiccup.

“Who would have they forced on you, have you stayed with your family? Who would have been the unlucky woman tasked with bringing a new generation of ‘toujours pur’ around?”

Sirius shrugs, closing his eyes to keep the room from spinning. “Cissa, probably. She was the closest in age.”

Marlene laughs, a throaty sound. “That would have been something. She’s so cold and…. *perfect*. Unreal. Like a doll in a box. She was a year above me, at Hogwarts.”

“I know, I was there,” Sirius reminds her.

“So polite. With me, at least. Since I’ve got the *right* blood. Malfoy was polite too, but he had this…”

Sirius opens his eyes to see her gesturing, as if searching for a word. The goblet is in her hand and it spills some liquid on the carpet.

“I don’t know. Something. In his tone, in his eyes-”

“Disdain,” Sirius helps her.

“That’s the one. They make a great couple. I saw the wedding picture in the Prophet. They looked elegant. No smiles though.”

“Smiling is for plebeians,” Sirius quotes his aunt Druella.

Marlene laughs, spilling more whiskey on the carpet. But nothing stays dirty for long in his house, Sirius noticed. Bella must send the elves to clean up after him, even if he never sees them around.

“How do you all achieve the same blasted blank face? Is it in your genes, do you practice in the mirror-”

“I was never good at it, mum said. Too expressive.”

“Aren’t you a hypocrite,” his father says, without looking up from his newspaper, as his mother screams at Sirius about his posture. “Your bitterness is showing, darling. You look constantly hateful. I think your face froze that way.”

“Oh, but you can be like that,” Marlene says, placing the goblet on the floor and throwing her legs on Sirius’ chest. “So many times, in Order meetings or in pubs, it’s like you flip a switch and your face closes off. Quite creepy.”

“It’s my last brain cell dying, listening to Moody about constant vigilance or to Fabian going on about Dorcas.”

“It happens when you’re angry,” Marlène observes. “That is, when you’re angry but you’re trying to control it. You’re even scarier that way, than when you explode in a tantrum.”

Sirius doesn’t know what to feel, hearing it. Luckily, he’s too drunk to feel much.

“Snap a picture next it happens. I can send it to mum. Make her proud.”

(-)

“Have you told Potter about your new *role*?” Voldemort asks, after they finish duelling.

All Sirius’ gratification at learning two new curses vanishes when hearing James’ names in Voldemort’s mouth.

“I hear you’re quite inseparable.”

“You *hear*,” Sirius spits. “No need for the air of mystery; just say Bella told you.”

Voldemort still doesn’t get angry with Sirius. The fact that he constantly humiliates him in their duels might take the edge off.

“It is not only Bella,” he comments, handing the wand back to Sirius.

“I’d rather we don’t talk about my personal life,” he barks, pocketing his wand.

It does not deter Voldemort. “And I’d rather know who is aware of the mark on your arm. You’ll learn that what I want takes precedence over what you want.”

There it is. The first overt statement that Sirius is a lowly servant to a superior master.

If he’d be Padfoot, his hackles would raise. Somehow they still do even if Sirius has no fur at the moment. He feels a growl deep in his chest, threatening to come out of his mouth.

It doesn’t help that he’s exhausted, having went some nights without sleeping, partying around London with Marlene and Peter.

The *lesson* hadn’t helped his tiredness, draining him of all the energy he had left.

Keep it together, the voice of reason begs him feebly, struggling to be heard in his head over the fury.

The Remus voice, he calls it.

It means nothing, you’re just playing your part.

With difficulty, Sirius curbs the instinct to say something scathing, like *‘oh, but in the world you’re trying to create, a pureblood’s wishes always take precedence over a half-blood’s or a mudblood’s.”*

He’s biting his tongue so hard he tastes blood.

“I will take your silence to mean that Potter knows. Who else?”

“No one,” Sirius spits out.

Voldemort nods. “Keep it that way.”

Sirius snaps at the order.

“Oh, don’t worry. I will. See, Dumbledore already served me the speech about secrecy and whatnot. So save your breath. I heard it already. You and him are remarkably alike, you know?”

A muscle ticks in Voldemort’s jaw, filling Sirius with satisfaction. Finally, a reaction.

“Secretive, conniving, full of yourselves. Why, you even have that dubious parentage in common,” Sirius says, with glee.

He’s about to add: *“at least he doesn’t hide his name, like a coward,”* but his breath is knocked out of his lungs as he flies into the nearest tree, his back connecting with it painfully.

“Never put away your wand while your adversary still has his,” Voldemort says, and he’s aiming for a casual tone, but failing.

He’s trying to pass the attack as a continuation of the duel; possibly because he realises Sirius is *boiling.*

You goaded him into it, Remus says in his head.

Sirius lets it slide, he pretends that indeed this is just another lesson, because what are the alternatives?

To accept he might get *‘punished’* for opening his stupid mouth is inconceivable.

Not when Sirius can’t do anything about it. His mother used to punish him, but Sirius would fight back. When he was young, he’d just run to his father or grandfather to overrule her; when he’d been older, he simply refused to back down and she couldn’t make him do anything he didn’t want.

At school he looked at detention as slaps on the wrist, an amusing effort by McGonagall to keep him contained.

The only man to have ever punished Sirius and got away with it had been his father, and Sirius hates being made to feel a small child again.

He gives it his best in the duel, that gets far more heated than the ones before, but his best isn’t enough. Not even close.

By the end, he’s far too drained to summon any energy for his anger.

He gets home, crawling up the stairs, barely making it to his bed.

Tuesday nights are starting to become the only nights he can sleep without getting drunk first.

Tuesday nights are the only nights when he's far too tired to dream.

(-)

"How's the second most beautiful girl in the world doing?" Sirius asks Andromeda, dropping a box of chocolates and a bouquet on the table.

Andromeda gets a pained look on her face and instantly Sirius knows she's thinking he meant the first one is Bella.

Which she is. But he hadn't meant to make Andromeda think of her sister.

"And here is the number one beauty," he hastily adds, when Nymphodora runs to him.

She jumps in his arms and he twirls her around, making her giggle.

"What did you bring me?" she demands.

"Is that all I am to you?" Sirius asks her. "You wound me so, darling."

"Cut it! Gimme!" Nymphadora is nothing if not persistent.

Sirius pulls the miniature enchanted bike from his pocket. It looks like his own, parked outside.

She loves it when Sirius convinces Andromeda to let him take her for a quick ride around the house.

"You spoil her," his cousin says.

"Someone has to," he answers, sitting on the couch, Nymphadora in his lap, examining the toy bike.

Her house is clean, but cluttered. The furniture is second hand.

Sirius wonders if Andromeda has dreams like his, where she's back home, in luxury.

She must, because while everything is on a budget, her clothes are of the finest quality available to her.

They don't talk about home.

They don't talk about Bella or Cissa or Regulus.

They don't talk much at all, actually.

But they're family, they only have each other, so Sirius visits once or twice a month and sits there in silence, if Ted or Nymphodora aren't around to fill it.

He wonders if it hurts Andromeda that her daughter has Bella's long eyelashes, the shape of her eyes. Narcissa's button nose.

It must.

It hurts Sirius.

That's why he always encourages her to use her Metamorpmagus skills when he's around.

He usually comes midday, but he lingers long enough that visit, playing with his little cousin, and Ted arrives from work early, insisting Sirius stays for dinner.

It is so strange to see this child, with Black features, laughing at the table, eating with pink plastic spoons, dressed in her day clothes.

Sirius and Andromeda don't speak during dinner.

They never were allowed to, as children.

Used to sit there silently, in formal wear, changing silver cutlery with every course.

Until Sirius hit puberty. Then their dinners were filled with screams.

On Sirius' side of the family, it was he and his mother.

On Andromeda's side, it was Bella doing all the screaming.

For his last dinner with the Blacks, it was Sirius *and* Bella.

Andromeda had abandoned them already.

His father was *gone*, severely ill, only his husk lingering in his bedroom.

Gaping, painful, impossible to heal wounds left behind them; the absence of two of their own that would never be coming back.

Sirius can't remember how the fight started. He can't remember much about the days following his fathers' abrupt decline.

It must have been something Cygnus told Bella and set her off.

And then the screaming started.

Sirius remembers Bella standing, face red with anger.

Cygnus standing.

Sirius standing.

Louder and louder, shrill noises ringing in his ears as both Bella and his mother outdid each other, sharp voices blending together until they became one continuous shriek.

He remembers Cygnus reaching for Bella, as if to grab her arm.

Sirius remembers smashing a plate filled with salmon and broccoli on his uncle's head.

He remembers pain somewhere in his temple as Cygnus fought back; Bella screaming bloody murder, grabbing Narcissa and throwing her out of the room, before trying to place herself between her father and Sirius.

He remembers his mother.

It's all unclear, but he remembers her cursing Cygnus, when the hands around Sirius' throat squeezed so tightly he couldn't breathe anymore.

And Cygnus had let him go; he tuned to his sister, wand raised, and Sirius remembers seeing red when the cutting hex takes his mother in the shoulder.

He remembers a knife, the weight of it in his grasp; he remembers how easily it slid in between Cygnus' ribs.

He remembers the blood spilling, ancient pure blood, all over the floor.

Even though he wasn't the one bleeding, Sirius still felt like he was, like all the pain for a father they didn't allow him to mourn- *Blacks don't cry, Blacks don't show weakness*- spilled out of him.

He's not quite sure how it stopped- some vague recollection of Bella aiming her wand at all of them, Sirius and Cygnus finally pulled apart.

Everything is blurry.

What Sirius remembers very clearly, what he sometimes sees when he closes his eyes trying to sleep, is Regulus, siting at the table, head bowed, thin shoulders shaking. A piece of broccoli had landed in his hair.

He just sat there, terrified to attract attention.

Forgotten, as always.

And Sirius left his house hours later, scared and furious, Bella's Dark Mark burned under his eyelids, her whispered fevered promises the dark lord would fix *everything*.

He left with the knowledge Bella would abandon the family too, lured away by a man like her sister before her.

None of that would have happened if his father had been present. Andromeda would have never dared run away, knowing Orion Black would have hunted her down anywhere in the world and drag her back home.

Bella wouldn't have taken the Dark Mark.

There would have been no curses flying at the dinner table, no Black spilling Black blood.

"I keep this family together. I am the shield upon which our enemies break. But I am dying. Now you must be the shield," his father says, as stoic as ever and he pulls the Black ring off his finger.

Sirius steps back, shaking his head. He'd never seen his father without his ring. It's a part of him, a symbol of his power and pride.

Without it he doesn't look like father anymore.

"Take it. You are my son, my firstborn. You are strong."

"Father-"

"No matter what your mother says, you are my legacy. You are what I leave behind. Take it."

"Dad-" Sirius' voice breaks, his soul shatters to pieces. He tries to ignore his father's illness, to pretend it isn't actually real. But it becomes very real in that moment.

He doesn't know this frail man that struggles to walk towards Sirius, leaning heavily on a cane.

The hands that take Sirius' own seem old, all of a sudden; they shake, lacking the sureness and strength they held only days before.

His father slips the ring on Sirius' finger. And then he grabs Sirius' chin and wipes a tear off his cheek.

"Blacks don't cry, Sirius. Blacks endure."

When he ran away from his home, just a couple of months after that last talk with his father, Sirius took the ring off.

It felt too big for him, anyway.

Sirius failed. He didn't keep them united. He was no shield. Andromeda fled from the house not a month after his father got too sick to stand; Cygnus started interfering in Regulus' life not a week after his father was incapacitated.

Bella showed up with a Dark Mark.

Sirius is not his father. He is no head of family.

He left the ring behind on his father's nightstand and snuck out of his house in the dead of night.

He once again forgot about Regulus; Sirius was too wrapped in his suffering, in his rage and impotence.

He was sixteen years old, and he had lost everything.

"Why are you sad, Padfoot?" Nymphodora asks, and Sirius shakes his head.

He's shivering, a cold in his chest that has no place in the brightly illuminated kitchen, with the merry fireplace burning a few feet away.

"I'm not sad," Sirius says, and he forces on a smile. "Blacks don't get sad."

Ted laughs, because it's funny to him, meaningless words, bragging words about their noble blood.

Andromeda doesn't laugh.

"Don't teach her that crap," she hisses at Sirius, face blank, shoulders straight, all of her pain and misery buried deep, deep inside, because that is how they were taught.

It was never just words. It's an oppressive lesson, drilled into them from birth, a rigorous set of rules on how they should conduct their lives.

Sirius ran away, Andromeda ran away. But the lessons stay with them, engrained in every cell.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you have the time, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You put too much effort into trying to predict my next move," Voldemort says, handing back Sirius' wand. "Why do you persist with this tactic if it so obviously fails, time and time again?"

He's not quite correct. It fails most of the time. But Sirius guessed right once or twice.

Not that it helped him much, in the end, but it did happen.

He doesn't point it out. There's no reason. Voldemort knows it and he can pretend he doesn't all he wants, he'll still know it.

"Because I am insane," Sirius says, conjuring a goblet of water, gulping it down. "A muggle said that's what insane is, doing the same shit over and over again, expecting different results. A singer I think."

Voldemort blinks, something he rarely does. "Einstein," he says, as if he can't help himself. "He wasn't a singer-never mind."

Sirius smirks. It is so obvious Voldemort is intimately familiar with Muggles.

Sirius doesn't point that out either.

"You aren't insane. You're stubborn and inexperienced-"

"I am quite experienced. I'm fighting in a war."

"You are used to weaker adversaries. Or people that you know. In both instances, you can predict their behaviour. That won't be the case with me. Desist. Focus on deflecting when I already made my move."

"It's too late by then."

"Yes, because you are a step behind, you attention spread thin."

"Fine," Sirius agrees sharply.

He'd never been particularly receptive to criticism.

And he's in a hurry.

But Voldemort catches on to it; he noticed Sirius' heart wasn't in it the last half an hour.

“You’re meant to be someplace else?”

Sirius’ eye twitches. “No.”

The full moon shines brightly above them.

“You may leave,” Voldemort says and Sirius cheers up. He can make it- he missed the transformation, but he can still be there- “I understand if you are too exhausted to continue. No man can keep up with me.”

Sirius clenches his jaws.

The fucking bastard.

“I’m fine,” Sirius growls and aims his wand at Voldemort.

There will be other full moons.

(-)

“Where were you?” Remus asks, voice weak.

Sirius enters the abandoned house just as the sun starts to rise.

James and Peter are shirtless, trying to give Remus water and some chocolate.

Peter looks over his shoulder at Sirius, one eyebrow raised.

James knows very well where Sirius has been, but it’s not like he can say it.

“Why Moony, aren’t Peter and I good enough?” He attempts to joke, holding a glass at Remus’ mouth. “We can manage without Sirius for one night.”

“That’s not quite true.” Remus isn’t in the mood for jokes. He never is after the full moon. “You know you have the best chance to stop the werewolf.”

His eyes, still a bit yellow so soon after the moon, stare right into Sirius’.

Padfoot is big enough, agile enough, teeth and claws sharp enough to keep the werewolf in check.

“Something came up,” Sirius says, which is the stupidest excuse he can come up with.

But there is no other- Remus knows no matter how Sirius likes his drinks, he’d never get drunk on a full moon. Not after the Snape incident. He knows Sirius would never miss a transformation for some bint.

Sirius can practically see the suspicion sinking in Remus' mind, like poison.

(-)

"Here, let me," James says, shoving Sirius aside and putting on a kettle.

All in silence. Lily is still sleeping, and it's never safe to wake her so early.

"Oh, shut up. I wasn't the one running with a werewolf all night. Let me do it-"

"First of all," James says, pushing Sirius into a chair. "You make the worst tea ever. Secondly, you were running around with Voldemort last night. I wager that's more tiring than a werewolf."

"I make the best tea," Sirius insists.

"Well, I don't take my tea with vodka first thing in the morning."

Sirius gives up and sits on a chair, balancing it on its back legs.

"How's that going?" James asks. "I know you're not supposed to tell me anything, at least Dumbledore seems to think I shouldn't know-"

"There's nothing to tell," Sirius says. "Still just duels."

"I don't like it," James says, pushing his glasses on his nose as he searches through a cupboard for his favourite tea blend.

I do, Sirius thinks, but doesn't say so.

"Could prove useful, though. I'm learning how he fights, his weak points and all that."

Voldemort has no weak points, but Sirius feels the need to give some hope to James.

"Yeah, you're learning it along with dark magic." James puts the sugar down and turns to look at Sirius. "I don't like it," he repeats.

"I always knew dark magic," Sirius says, cautious.

James waves it off. "A curse or two from the library in Grimmauld; that's nothing compared to what Voldemort probably shows you."

Sirius bites his lip but doesn't correct James. It would be useless, anyway, to insist Sirius knew more than 'a curse or two'.

James is aware, deep down, that it is more than that.

It's just better left unsaid.

"It'll be alright, Jamie. Don't fret."

"Don't call me Jamie." He sighs, returns to his tea preparation. "Of course it will be alright. I know that. I just hate that you have to go through it."

"Who's Einstein?" Sirius asks to change the subject.

"Huh?"

"A muggle that had this famous quote. I thought he was a singer, but apparently not. Lily drags you to enough dinners with her parents and movie nights and all that. Maybe you heard of him."

"No idea." James puts a cup of tea in front of Sirius. "Lily got rid of all the alcohol in the house after you got Peter drunk and he threw up in our laundry basket. So you'll have to take it straight."

"An awful way to start the day." Sirius wrinkles his nose but takes a sip.

"You want me to make you breakfast?" James asks, eager.

Sirius shudders. "No, thank you. You know you're not supposed to cook unsupervised, lest you burn down the house."

"You can supervise me." James wiggles his eyebrows.

"James, we're two pureblooded rich kids. We haven't seen a pan until Lily showed us one. I don't think I count as supervision."

"I resent that! I did use a pan before! I used it to kill a spider when I was twelve."

(-)

He hears the door opening and then slamming shut.

"You better be ready!" Bella's voice floats up the stairs.

Sirius takes one last look in the mirror, a conflicting feeling in his heart.

He doesn't remember the last time he wore a robe- not this sort of robe, with an intricate design, tailor made, golden chains fasted around it.

His hair is tied neatly with a black ribbon.

If it weren't for the dragon tail peeking from under his collar and lashing around Sirius' neck, he could look like his father.

"Stop it," Sirius hisses at the tattoo, pushing it with his finger, until the tail disappears back under the robe.

"Is that my grandmother's coat rack?" Lestrange's voice. He sounds suspicious.

"So?" Bellatrix snaps at him. "You hated that old bitch. We hardly needed it."

Sirius breathes in deeply and gets out of his bedroom and down the stairs.

Bella always dresses well, but this time she's more elegant than usual. More modest too, no corsets to squeeze her chest and put her breasts on display.

Sirius rather likes the corsets. But Narcissa probably wouldn't appreciate her sister flaunting her cleavage in front of her husband.

"Look at you," Bella coos when she sees him, instantly at his side. "So handsome."

She kisses his cheek and puts her hand around his elbow.

"Is this the firewhiskey I brought from Peru?" Lestrange demands, coming out of the living room, holding a bottle Sirius had emptied the night before.

"It *was*," Sirius drawls, narrowing his eyes.

Lestrange is an enormous brute. Sirius remembers a time when he'd just come up to the other's shoulder.

But Sirius is not a kid any longer. He's just as tall now, and almost just as wide.

"There he is, the Black sheep."

Sirius opens his mouth, but Bella squeezes his elbow.

"Now, now. Play nice. Cissa will be upset if we come late and bloodied."

"We wouldn't want to upset dear Cissa," Lestrange says, sarcastic.

"No, we wouldn't," Sirius and Bella answer at the same time.

Lestrange looks at them for a second. They stare back, with probably identical expressions.

"Merlin, give me patience," he mutters.

"Merlin should give you some brains, you're sorely lacking in that department," Sirius says, and before he can get an answer, he goes on. "Shall we?"

"Yes," Bellatrix says, and they head to the door, Lestrange trailing behind them.

“You should hold my arm, darling,” he says, a minute later, when they all materialise in the garden of Malfoy Manor.

Bellatrix ignores her husband. “Remember when I broke Lucius’ nose? Right there under the willow?” She points to a tree in the distance.

“I remember,” Sirius assures her, smiling down at her.

“And he tried to curse me back, but you bit his leg,” Bella laughs. “You were an adorable toddler!”

“Well, it was the only part of him I could reach.”

Lucius kicked him in the face afterwards and then their house-elves broke the squabble off and they were all dragged to their respective fathers.

Bella was punished. Lucius was punished.

Sirius’ father took Sirius in his lap, gave him a pat on the back.

“Well done,” he whispered as he healed Sirius’s bruise. *“You always stand up for family.”*

“Sirs, Madame,” a house-elf bows when they reach the door, after climbing the steps. “Master and Mistress will receive you in the living room.”

It’s not Lucius’ crazy elf, Sirius observes, disappointed. That one was a funny creature. Dizzy, Dorry, something like that.

The Manor changed since last he saw it; of course, back then Narcissa hadn’t married Lucius.

It’s redecorated in a more modern way. Sirius observes the wallpaper has flowers now instead of skulls.

The Malfoys- and doesn’t Sirius hate thinking of his cousin as a Malfoy- stand when the little group enters the opulent room.

Lucius’ cold eyes zero in on Sirius, calculating as always.

Narcissa, whose reaction Sirius had feared the most, acts like she just saw Sirius the other day.

She allows Lestrange to kiss her hand, and then she comes to Sirius and kisses his cheek.

“Cousin,” she says, no inflection in her voice.

Bella forces the three of them into a group hug. “It’s so nice, isn’t is?” she whispers.

Narcissa extricates herself from the hug.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Sirius,” Lucius extends his hand and Sirius takes it, shaking it once.

And then they’re all sitting. Lucius with his wife, Bellatrix with Sirius on the other settee and Lestrange on an armchair.

An awkward silence follows.

Sirius never imagined he’d be back at Malfoy Manor. Several memories from his childhood play out before his eyes; running through that same living room, Lucius helping him with his tie, Andromeda snogging Yaxley and Regulus keeping watch so no one would find them.

“There he is!” Sirius exclaims, when the strange elf makes an appearance, carrying a tray.

“Sir Black!” He squeaks, delighted.

“I thought you’d have killed him by now,” Sirius tells Lucius, as the elf serves them drinks.

An extremely peculiar creature. Sirius always believed his days were numbered.

“I get the urge, believe me,” Lucius sneers, and the elf shudders. “But Narcissa took a liking to it.”

She would have; all the Black girls were practically raised by Kreacher. Their mother was always depressed and their father wanted a boy.

They’ve grown uncomfortably close to Kreacher and developed an undue fondness for elves, in general.

“What’s he called? I forgot.”

“Dobby,” Lucius answer as Dobby presents the tray to Sirius and Bella.

And there it is, Sirius’ favourite French brandy.

Nothing is a coincidence with this lot. If he were just another guest at the Manor, he would have been asked first, for his preferred drink.

But he isn’t. He’s family. And you never ask family what they want, because you’re supposed to know already.

Something warm spreads through Sirius, and it’s not the liquor going down.

Bella caught on to the gesture as well, and she smiles at Sirius, holding her own drink.

“The house looks great, Cissa,” Sirius says, because he’s supposed to.

All those lessons in etiquette are implanted in his head, even if he seldomly makes use of them.

“Thank you,” she answers politely.

And so it begins. Sirius relaxes slightly as the visit goes on.

Rodolphus and Lucius don't talk about Ministry business, nor do they brag too much about their independent financial investments, as men are supposed to at these gatherings.

They don't do it so Sirius won't be left out.

Again that warmth, that he doesn't want to feel, and Sirius downs his glass in one go.

He'd expected he'd be shunned. And no one can snub people like a bunch of rich purebloods. He'd expected all the little jabs at him from the get go. Mix up with the drinks, talking about things he has no idea about- all of it.

It would have been easier to bear than this gracious hospitality.

They talk about Quidditch instead. They still bring gold into it- just no way to avoid it with Lucius. The man can't help himself. He's sponsoring the Falmouth Falcons- Sirius remembers seeing a game with them, before he even started Hogwarts.

"One day, I'll buy the team," Lucius told Andromeda, who just rolled her eyes at him.

"I slept with the Seeker's wife," Sirius says, pressed to find something to add to the conversation.

Narcissa pretends she hadn't heard, but Bellatrix laughs.

"Rabastan has been trying to get her for ages." Lestrange laughs, too.

"I know, I saw him lurking around at her concerts."

"She sings horribly." Bella wrinkles her nose.

"It's not her voice that drew my attention," Sirius says, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

Lucius, who had quite the reputation as a Casanova before he married, clearly wants to say something, but cannot, with Narcissa sitting beside him.

They spend some time gossiping about several people.

Lucius is vicious with his tongue and Sirius always secretly enjoyed hearing him put people down; it's more entertaining when the people in question are present, but he still has a laugh or two before they are called for dinner.

Sirius can't help but notice that Lucius didn't bring up none of the people close to Sirius. Not even Dumbledore- and everyone likes to say something scathing about the Headmaster at these sort of gatherings.

They're all *too* nice. Sneaky Slytherins.

At the enormous dining table, the conversation turns sparser.

Sirius makes sure to use all the proper cutlery, complimenting Narcissa over every meal, as he should.

He'd never bothered with manners while he was still at home, determined to piss off his mother and all the people she forced him to visit, but he wants Narcissa to accept him.

She doesn't.

Oh, she's all smiles, and 'thank you', but he knows her well enough to realise it's all fake.

He has to suffer through four damned courses before they are officially done, retiring to the living room for another drink.

Narcissa excuses herself at some point, going to check on the house-elves and the dessert. Sirius goes after her.

"That's not a good idea," Bella says, right behind him.

"I never had a good idea in my life." Sirius gets lost for a second, after taking a wrong turn.

He rectifies his course.

"She's still a bit… ah… upset," Bella whispers.

"You don't say."

"It's your funeral," she sighs and doesn't pester him anymore.

"Dobby!" Sirius snaps, frustrated when he can't find the damned kitchen, because it wasn't a place he often visited. If at all.

And Bella is equally clueless.

"Sir Black!" Dobby pops out of thin air, ears flopping around.

"Take me to the kitchen."

And so he does, leads them to a door in the eastern wing.

Sirius breathes in, squares his shoulders and goes in.

"You've got a lot of nerve to show your face," Narcissa says in a frosty tone.

She's been waiting for him, seated at a long table, arms and legs crossed, eyes sparkling.

Two other house-elves are hustling around her.

"You invited me," he offers.

"Lucius invited you. I could hardly say no."

Because Blacks don't show dissent in front of others. Which was why Bellatrix arranged for a dinner with Lucius and Lestrange there, knowing Narcissa won't say anything in their presence.

Bella comes to stand beside Sirius, clinging to his arm.

He doesn't really know how to deal with Narcissa. No one really knows, besides Bella.

She's the only person in his family Sirius never yelled at; it's just impossible to raise his voice at her when she answers with that cold, unaffected voice, no expression on her face.

"He was very young," Bella says. "He's older now, wiser, and he came back."

"Regulus was young, too." Narcissa doesn't look at her sister, pinning Sirius with her icy gaze.

"You know it wasn't really a choice, Cissy," Bella insists. "You were there that night, and after the fight with father-"

"Yes, I was there! Regulus was there! You were there. And we didn't leave, did we? I suppose you got to go to your Manor. But me and Reggie stayed there. Alone with father and aunt."

"You weren't under the same pressure I was," Sirius says, getting heated. Narcissa had her own burdens, and while Sirius acknowledges the order to 'be silent and smile' isn't an easy one to live with, it's not the same with the things that were demanded of him. "You knew the time will come soon for you to marry and leave-"

"You do realise, do you, that after you took off, all that pressure was placed on your brother? Who was even younger than you?"

It's like a knife in the heart.

Sirius knows. He knows it very well.

"Regulus has a better temper," he says, clinging to the excuse. "And mum loves him-"

"Not only you didn't care, but then you mocked him at school, sneering at him he won't ever suffice as heir apparent."

Seeing Regulus with Sirius' ring, with their *father's* ring, had not been easy.

He knew it wasn't Regulus' fault. He knew the ring only went to him because Sirius left; that Regulus, unlike many other second sons, had never wanted to take it from Sirius.

He knew, but knowing never helped Sirius control his anger and his pain.

It didn't matter Regulus had no fault. It didn't matter Snape and Remus had no fault.

He just wanted to get rid of his misery, and it felt better to unload it on others, to make them hurt, too.

“The mess you left behind… No, of course you didn’t care. The consequences of Sirius’ Black choices are always someone else’ problem, never yours. You and that *whore*,” Narcissa spits, finally some emotion colouring her tone when she references Andromeda. “You never cared for the rest of us. And now you have the nerve to stroll back in, like you never left at all.” She stands. “Just five months after we buried your father. What a coincidence you show your face now-”

“Enough!” Bellatrix snaps, when Sirius goes rigid. “That’s quite enough, Narcissa.”

She stands in front of Sirius.

“This is my house, you don’t get to-”

“I raised you. I took care of you. I get to do whatever I want. Pull that stick out of your arse! I get it, you’re upset with him. But he’s back. We stick together from now on. And that’s final.”

“If she doesn’t want me here,” Sirius tries, but Bella cuts over him, too.

“None of that. Of course she wants you here. She missed you. Now kiss and make up. Quick, before I get angry with both of you.”

Narcissa retreats under her ice shield, everything about her cold, no trace of the emotion before.

Sirius gets past Bella and gathers Narcissa in his arms. She allows it, but remains stiff as a board.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers in her ear. “You’re right, about everything. I’m sorry.”

She softens, if only a little.

She knows saying ‘sorry’ does not come easy to Sirius.

“You’ll have to work hard to make up for it,” she says, still not hugging back.

(-)

The headache wakes him up. Sirius opens his eyes lazily, bothered by the sunlight.

He doesn’t recognise his surroundings.

It’s not like it never happened before.

He's in a bed, and there is a warm body pressed into his side, covered by blankets.

Sirius carefully manoeuvres his arm from under whoever it is and then lowers the blanket to take a peek.

It's Marlene.

He nudges her with his elbow.

"Piss off," she mumbles, turning on her other side.

"I'm already disappointed to wake up beside you instead of a curvy blonde," Sirius tells her, elbowing her again. "The least you can do is tell me where we are."

Marlene turns back and punches him in the stomach. "You almost woke up beside a blond. *He* was basically sitting in your lap. He wasn't very curvy, though."

Now that she mentioned it, he thinks he has a hazy memory of a smiling man with blue eyes, somewhere at a Muggle party.

Marlene looks at him, eyeliner and mascara smudged around her eyes.

He doesn't know what to say about the blond. He's not supposed to like men.

It's generally acceptable in their world, unlike the muggle one, but not for someone like Sirius.

He still wants to hide in a narrow hole in the ground when he remembers the first time he kissed a boy.

Sirius was fourteen, and Rosier's French cousin was handsome. Rodolphus and uncle Alphard gave them firewhsiky when none of the other adults were paying attention.

He can't remember how and when they decided to go on their own- something about showing the foreigner around the house.

They didn't get very far. Sirius felt the need to kiss him and he was never one to keep himself from doing as he pleased.

His mother caught them, bursting into one of Avery's guests' room.

"Of course you'd be one of those people," she screeched at him. *"You can't do anything right, can you? I can't wait to see your father's face when I inform him!"*

She mercifully allowed Rosier to leave the room, but she stayed there and preached at Sirius about duty and heirs and shame for close to half an hour.

Since then, every time he happens to find a man attractive, Sirius hears his mother's screams in his ear.

Unless he's very, *very* drunk. Then he doesn't hear the screeching.

"You look like a racoon," he says, trying to wipe some of the black around Marlene's eyes, but just making the situation worse.

"You look like an idiot."

"So we're both our usual selves."

Sirius stands-or tries to. His jeans are lowered around his thighs and he almost falls on his face.

Marlene laughs at him. Cruel woman.

"Did you spell your shirt or something? I couldn't get it off."

As a matter of fact, he did spell his shirt so it wouldn't come off. Sirius is particularly happy about that lucky foresight. He'd planned to spend the night amongst muggles, but he knows that sometimes he ends up far from where he meant, so he thought to take precautions.

He's painfully aware of his Dark Mark and the need to hide it.

"James' idea of a joke," he mutters. "The prat. So where are we?"

"Somewhere in Leeds," Marlene answers, standing. She is still dressed, but she seems to be missing her knickers, because she pulls out her wand and tries to summon them. Nothing happens. "One of the muggles from the pub, a student or something, offered to take the party to their house."

"A student?" Sirius asks, horrified.

"Don't be an idiot, one of those older students they have. For that grown up school."

Ah, right. University. Sirius calms down. He doesn't have many morals, but he draws the line at sleeping with teenagers.

"You were harassing people all night about someone called Einstein. You demanded to know who he was."

"Did they tell me?"

She shrugs. "They seemed to think you were an idiot for not knowing. Apparently, everyone knows who he is. One girl had something to say about you *'he's dumb, but at least he's handsome'*. A sentiment I agree with wholeheartedly."

"Hilarious, McKinnon."

She sticks out her tongue. "See you around, Black," she says and then Disapparates.

Sirius does so too, a moment later.

(-)

“Thank God you’re here!” Lily’s eyes are red and puffy. She sniffles and hugs Sirius, her arms trembling lightly.

He pushes her away. “Where is he?”

“He’s getting dressed. Remus is trying to talk some sense into him-”

Sirius runs up the stairs, knocking over a small table in his haste, shattering a vase.

“-and I know it’s hard, but you have to consider the circumstances. It’s not just you, you’re putting Lily at risk-” Remus trails off when Sirius enters the room.

James looks fine for a second. He has that stubborn expression on his face, the focused look in his eyes. But as soon as he sees Sirius, it melts away into pain.

Fuck.

Sirius doesn’t know what to say. Nothing would help, in any case. No words would have soothed Sirius’ pain when his father died, and none will soothe James.

So he goes over and hugs him.

“They won’t let me see mum,” James says, gripping Sirius so tightly he almost crushes his ribs. “But I’m going, anyway.”

“Of course.” His voice comes out feeble and low; Sirius winces hearing it. He tries again. “Of course we’re going.”

“Sirius-” Remus says. “They have-” he swallows, a pained look on his face as well. Every single one of them loved Fleamont Potter. “She has dragon pox. A particularly lethal strain of it.”

It must be bad if it killed Mr Potter in less than two days. He was old, is true, but Sirius’ grandfather had dragon pox just a couple years past and he was fine, even if far older than Mr Potter.

“Where is she?” Sirius asks, when James finally lets him go.

“They took her to St Mungo’s. The Healer floo-called to let me know I won’t be getting in- Sirius, I have to see mum.”

Sirius nods. “We’re getting in.”

He doesn’t know how, yet, but they will get in.

(-)

It's rather simple. Once at the hospital, Sirius does his best impersonation of his father.

The straight back, the sneer, the look of derision.

"My family built the wing we're standing in," he hisses at the Healer. It helps that a portrait of his great grandmother is right there on the wall. "We donate quite a substantial amount of gold every year, I'll remind you. Step aside, sir, or we'll have a *problem*."

The hate and disgust is clear in the man's eyes, but Sirius is long used to it.

"They all envy us. They fear us. Everyone that is not us is our enemy", his mother says when Sirius asks her why people don't seem to like them very much.

"You don't have to-" James suggests, as they walk alone through the hallway of the Infectious Wing.

"I've had it as a kid. I'll be fine."

Even if he hadn't had it already, there would be no stopping him from going in with James.

As soon as he sees her, small and frail in her bed, he knows Mrs Potter will soon follow her husband.

"James, no-" she moans, her voice hoarse. "No, no. Get out! Sirius, get out!"

"He'll stay at the door, Mrs Potter," Sirius says, begging James with his eyes.

James hovers at a distance, clearly not wanting to upset her further.

"I'm immune, I can sit with you."

So he does. He sits at her side, holding her hand in his own. He abhors it. He never knew how to deal with sick people.

It reminds him of his father and-

He shakes his head. He needs to stay strong for James.

"Is it true? Is-" she wheezes as she tries to breathe. "Fleamont- is-"

"He's sick, mum. Has a room right next to yours," James lies.

"Oh!" She puts the hand that Sirius isn't holding on her chest. "Oh, I thought- I thought-"

"You'll both be fine," James states, coming closer.

"You will," Sirius lies, too.

“Boys,” she says, her eyes almost closing, her fingers weakly clutching at Sirius’ own. “I don’t think I’ll-”

“You’ll be fine, mum!”

Voices come from the corridor. Someone is highly upset they’re there by the sound of it.

“How could you let them in?”

“- what did you want me to do, he’s a Black-”

The door opens soon after, three Healers walking through.

A short fight follows, James yelling at them as they try to reason with him.

When one of them grabs James’ elbow, Sirius stands, ready to take out his wand.

“Sirius.”

She won’t let go of his hand.

He looks down and meets her eyes.

“You’ll take care of my boy after I’m gone, yes? Promise me.”

Sirius was always jealous of James and what an extraordinary mother he had.

She is *motherly*, loving, kind. She cooked for James, laughed with him and helped him with his homework.

And how is it fair she’s dying when there are far more terrible mothers out there in the world?

“-she’s my mother, you heartless monsters-”

“Mr Potter, really-”

Sirius bends, kisses her forehead, gently-

“Look at that lunatic!!! Don’t touch her, Mr Black.”

“I swear it,” Sirius whispers, and when he lifts his head, she gives him a small, tired smile. Her skin is already scarred, getting greener and greener right under his eyes.

“Go now, get out. I want to rest. Go, James!”

(-)

James breaks when they leave the Hospital.

He doesn't say anything, just sits on the pavement and cries.

Sirius sits beside him, a hand over his shoulder.

"You'll come to my place. Just in case- not to expose Lily," Sirius says, what feels like hours later.

"I need- dad is still home." And that sends James crying again. "Fuck, I can't- I can't believe he's gone- and mum-"

Sirius hugs him, holds him close. He knows that pain and he'd do anything to spare James of it.

He has Lily, Sirius thinks. He has a family of his own. That will help. Surely, it must help, at least a little.

And he has Sirius, Remus and Peter. They'll be there for him, they all understand.

After all, they have experience. Peter's father died in their third year at Hogwarts. Remus' mother just the past year.

They all know what to do. They are used to sleepless night, to kind words and lots of hugs. They did it for each other already.

They didn't do it for you, a small voice says inside his head.

"I'm sorry," James said, uncomfortable, when he read in the newspaper Orion Black was dead.

"I'm here if you need me." Peter couldn't meet his eyes.

"My condolences", was all Remus had to offer.

Stop it, he snaps at himself. It was different. It wasn't their fault. How were they supposed to know how much it hurt him, when Sirius never talked about his father?

A muggle passing by yells something in their direction. His mates, about five of them, laugh loudly.

Sirius thinks it's a derogatory term used for same-sex couples in the Muggle world and that's all it takes.

As he lets go of James and heads to them, he's almost relieved, almost thankful for the idiots. Because the spark of anger chases away any other feelings, leaving behind only fire.

And someone to get punished for all the injustices happening around him.

(-)

Sirius and James still have visible bruises at the funeral three days later.

A double funeral.

Mr and Mrs Potter were both admired. The eulogy in the Daily Prophet is almost two pages long, but few people show up, afraid to contract the disease.

James stands between Lily and Sirius, with Remus on Lily's other side, and Peter beside Sirius.

They all cry.

All except Sirius, of course.

"You don't have to bottle it all up, son," Mr Potter told him that fateful summer, when he found Sirius punching walls in their basement. *"It's alright to be sad. It's alright to cry."*

"I'm not your son," was all Sirius said back.

Even after that, Mr Potter still spoke affectionately to him, still opened his door for Sirius, any time he needed it.

They all go to Godric Hollow's with James and Lily, after Marlene assures James he'd have developed symptoms already if he had contracted dragon pox.

James is catatonic, sitting on the sofa and staring into space.

Remus is quiet, too. Peter fidgets around the room, sniffling and playing with the sleeves of his robe.

It's Tuesday and Sirius is terrified of the moment when the mark will burn and he'll have to leave.

"It's alright," Lily whispers in his ear, knowing where he goes every Tuesday. "We've got him."

But the hours pass, night comes, then dawn and Sirius' mark doesn't burn even if for the past almost four months he'd seen Voldemort on Tuesdays with no exception.

(-)

Neither mention it the next Tuesday.

Sirius waits at the cabin, as it's his custom, and when Voldemort shows up, they don't speak of the missed appointment.

Sirius should thank him.

And he would, if he were any other man. But it's Voldemort. He didn't do it out of consideration.

He did it to charm Sirius, to manipulate him, prove he's not as monstrous as Dumbledore claims; that he cares Sirius was obviously having a bad day.

Sirius won't fall for it.

He is my enemy, he reminds himself. *He seeks to take people like Lily out of our world, take away the only comfort James has left.*

(-)

When he opens the door, hangover and in just his underpants, he doesn't expect to see Narcissa standing on the other side.

She scoffs at his dishevelled sight. "Is this how you greet your guests?"

Sirius might have no issues opening his door while he's mostly naked, but he never leaves his wand behind.

He waves it and a robe covers him, in less than a second.

"No," Sirius answers. "I usually get dressed if I'm *expecting* someone over."

And he did not expect her.

"Are you going to invite me in?" she asks, an eyebrow raised.

He steps away and gestures to his hallway.

She comes in and Sirius slams the door behind her.

"I think I have water, or firewhiskey-no, you don't drink that-ah, I'll find some wine," he mumbles, trying to remember his manners as a host.

He doesn't have many.

They taught host duties to the girls.

He was taught curses.

Narcissa rounds on him as soon as they are in his living room.

“Have you talked to your brother?” She goes straight to it, which is not something she usually does.

“No,” Sirius says, not meeting her eyes, an intense pain stabbing in his chest. “I will,” he goes on, but his mouth is dry.

When?

“When he’s done with Hogwarts,” Sirius answers himself, out loud.

There are only a couple of months left until summer, after all.

“You have to talk to him before that,” Narcissa says. Demands, almost.

He meets her eyes. Her serious tone sends shivers down his spine.

“Why-”

“When you left, all of your duties fell onto him.”

“He’ll be good at it. He always had more patience with papers and-”

“I’m not talking about handling the estates and the fortune,” she cuts over him. “Other things were expected of him. And not from the *family*.”

Sirius gets it a second before she spells it out for him.

“He’s Marked.”

It’s Sirius’ worst nightmare.

It was something he’d often thought about; if one day, once his brother is out of school, they’ll run into each other on the battlefield.

Narcissa studies his face. “I was sure Bella didn’t tell you. Not yet. She must have known you’d react…. poorly.”

The shock is wearing off, and anger is quick to replace it. A muscle twitches violently in his jaw.

“And while I respect the cause,” Narcissa says, as mindful as ever with her words, “while I understand- Regulus isn’t built like you and Bella or Lucius. He-” She bites her lip, gently. “He’s not-”

“Stop it,” Sirius snarls at her. “Speak your mind. Or do you think I’ll run and tell Voldemort that you chose a misfortunate word when speaking about him and his cause?”

“The *dark lord*,” Narcissa says, narrowing her eyes. “Death Eaters call him ‘the dark lord’”.

Right. That's true. Sirius can't slip up with that.

"Regulus doesn't understand what he's gotten himself into. He doesn't realise what will be demanded of him. While I can't claim that I know, I've seen enough, I've gathered enough to suspect this is not a place for him. Bellatrix is no help. I can't talk to her about it; she's just proud of him. She- she won't hear a bad word about… *you know*… about anything."

Sirius' head is reeling, blinded by rage.

And fear.

Guilt. *This is my fault. I wasn't there to keep him out of it.*

Voldemort wanted the Black heir to his collection and while Sirius was busy playing Order with Dumbledore, Voldemort got his Black heir.

"I know the Mark is for life. But if you convince Bella to speak up for Regulus- or maybe if you have enough standing with the dark lord yourself- perhaps there's a way to get him out of it."

Her voice lowers, becomes softer, her eyes wider.

It could be a ruse. Narcissa learned, early on, that while she held no power over men, not in a traditional way, she had another power.

Her beauty and feigned vulnerability never failed to make men do what she wanted.

It even swayed her demented father, on occasion.

And she does look vulnerable as she stands before Sirius.

"He doesn't belong there. You know it. Help him."

(-)

As soon as he sees Voldemort, hate ignites inside Sirius.

It's been there all weekend, but he'd struggled to contain it. He swore to himself he'll be smart about it.

Yelling at Voldemort or attempting to strangle him won't help with anything.

It won't help Regulus.

But he just wants to punch the man.

Or destroy something.

‘*Use your words, Sirius’*, his mother said when Sirius was five and had a tantrum.

‘Use your anger’, his father said when Sirius was fifteen and had a tantrum, because he just couldn’t learn a complicated curse, meant for people much older than him.

He stands there, frozen in indecision, his mother and father whispering in his ears conflicting advice.

Voldemort takes in Sirius’ demeanour.

“Is something the matter?”

“You marked my brother?” The words come out of his mouth before he has a chance to stop them.

Nothing changes on Voldemort’s face.

“Who told you?”

Fuck. He just then realises that he wasn’t supposed to know, and there are only two possible candidates that could have told him.

Bellatrix or Lucius.

And the glint in Voldemort’s eyes assures Sirius someone will get punished over this leak.

“No one,” he answers. “I figured you’re recruiting all the scions of the Twenty-Eight that you can get your hands on. I was asking you. But I guess you answered.”

No reaction. Sirius can’t be sure the lie was convincing. In fact, he’s pretty certain it wasn’t.

“So?” Sirius demands, when Voldemort doesn’t say anything.

“Are you asking me to explain myself to you?” Voldemort’s voice is infused with both amusement and irritation.

“He’s a child, for Merlin’s sake! He’s still in school-”

“I don’t usually Mark children.” Voldemort steps closer to Sirius. “But then I saw how well Dumbledore is doing, recruiting his students. He’s filling up his ranks quickly. A good strategy. After all, children are foolish, easily manipulated.”

It’s a very clear jab at Sirius.

“I wasn’t manipulated into anything,” he snarls back. “And while Dumbledore asked us to join the Order in the last month of our seventh year, he made it clear we’ll only be helping after we are done with Hogwarts.”

Voldemort nods. “Your brother isn’t serving. Not actively. He’ll join us in earnest when he’s done with school.”

“No,” Sirius says. “He won’t.”

Voldemort’s eyebrow raises, just barely. He comes even closer. He must often use his height to intimidate others. He must like to loom over people until they cower and bow their heads.

Or maybe that’s just something I do.

Sirius is almost as tall. He doesn’t even need to lift his chin to stare into those red-brown eyes.

He attempts to soften his tone. “He’s not a fighter,” Sirius tries.

“I’ll make him one,” Voldemort says.

Hurt him. Gauge his eyes out.

Sirius banishes the voices, fighting to keep himself in check.

“He isn’t a fighter and he will never be a fighter. It’s not in his nature.”

“He is a powerful boy. He was eager to join me. I understand he does very well in school, better than you did-”

“Yes, because he’s a studious lad. I spent my time at Hogwarts doing anything but studying. He likes books and history and papers. He’s not-” Sirius breathes in. “You’ve got me. So you don’t need him. Whatever you wanted him for, I can do it in his stead.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

“But he wears the Black ring. He will claim the Black seat in the Wizengamot, now that he’s of age and your father is dead. And I need that seat. I need his vote. Will you claim it for me?”

Sirius’ heart goes wild in his chest.

He pictures it for a second. Taking the ring back, getting the seat-

“I-” he stutters, unsure. He hates it. He hates how weak he feels.

He’s more afraid to go back home than he is to stand there with Voldemort.

“I can’t take the seat. I-Dumbledore, the Order- They’ll know I’ve joined you if I go back home-” he tries to think of excuses.

Voldemort smiles. “Indeed. So you see, you can’t do what Regulus can achieve for me.”

Sirius snaps.

“He can have that gaudy ring on his finger, but while I am alive, he will never be the head of the Black family. My father-” Sirius’ voice breaks, just a little. He coughs, to hide it. “He left all of it to me. The gold, the house, the ring. I can take them back.”

He’d been tempted on occasion. Fantasised about going home, kicking his mother out, telling her he’s taking all the galleons.

You’re no son of mine, she screamed at him and it hurt. It still hurts.

If you’re not my mother, you have no place in my house, spending my money, he’d say.

But it’s just a fantasy. Sirius could never do it.

“I can claim the seat.” That, he could do. And it is his. The Wizengamot doesn’t care about his mother’s opinions, just like his father hadn’t cared. The law is clear: firstborns have priority. “I don’t even have to use it. I’ll just block it. Regulus won’t be of any use to you if I block it.”

Voldemort laughs, a sinister sound that raises the hairs at the back of his neck.

“Are you *blackmailing* me, Sirius?”

“No,” he says, fast. “I-” fuck.

Silence falls as he tries to find the right words. He doesn’t.

“You’re asking for a favour,” Voldemort tells him, after some seconds of silence.

“Yes,” Sirius spits.

Blacks don’t ask for favours, but *fine*. If that’s what Voldemort wants to hear…

“I grant favours, especially of this magnitude, to my most loyal Death Eaters. Those that have been with me the longest. Those that proved themselves.”

Sirius closes his eyes, briefly.

“I don’t know where your loyalties lie. You don’t know that very well yourself. You did nothing to deserve a favour.”

Merlin, how he hates Voldemort.

“What do you want?” Sirius spits, because Voldemort wants something, undoubtedly.

Voldemort examines him, his eyes trailing over Sirius’ face.

“If you want me to reconsider your brother’s involvement, you owe me another seat in the Wizengamot.”

Sirius frowns. “I don’t know how I could give you another seat-”

Voldemort gets out of Sirius' space, walks calmly to the small table. He sits, unhurried, a small smile playing on his lips.

"Oh, I do."

Chapter End Notes

Poor Sirius had a bad month. But from now on, he'll get to be more active as a Death Eater.
We'll see Regulus in the next chapter.
Thank you for reading and let me know if you liked it!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Voldemort knocks at precisely eleven o'clock on Thursday, like they established.

Not a second late, not a second early.

Sirius left the door open for him, but he knocks instead.

Sirius wonders why Voldemort didn't simply summon him to wherever they're supposed to go.

He knows you hate the thought of being summoned. He must know that is why you always wait for him at the cabin.

And he's already doing something Sirius abhors.

"These are yours," he says, handing Sirius a simple black robe, folded perfectly. On top of it, a silver mask.

A Death Eater mask.

Sirius noticed all the masks are similar, but some have distinctive markings.

He recognised Rodolphus on the battlefield plenty of times, even if the mask covers his face entirely. But Sirius knows how he fights, grew up around him and Rabastan, so he always recognised them.

And Rodolphus' mask is the most peculiar out of all of them, with a complex design.

Sirius wonders what it all means.

His is not plain either. A skull slashed by two lines is carved into the right cheek, underneath the eye socket.

On the left side, the wings and the alicorn of a unicorn.

The oldest symbol for purity.

When regular people think of unicorns and purity, they imagine untainted souls, children, goodness.

For other people, it is the symbol of the grace and strength of *blood* purity.

“You won’t need them tonight, but there will be times when you will.”

Sirius will hate wearing a mask, he knows. He hates just touching it.

“In some cases, it is a futile endeavour to keep your identities secret amongst yourself.”

Sirius snorts. “I’ll say.”

“But not all my Death Eaters grew up together. Not all of you went to Hogwarts at the same time, so you won’t know each other by your wands or fighting style. Yet there is a hierarchy, to avoid chaos. In battle, you will take orders based on this.” He points to the skull. “A plain skull represents the lowest rank; they have to always follow, never lead. Then you have the skull with one line slashing across it. Even higher, two lines. And then three lines.”

Sirius is instantly, absurdly, upset he only has two. He doesn’t take orders from anyone. It’s enough he has to obey Voldemort- but at least it’s *Voldemort*.

“Above all, there is the green skull, with the snake around it. The ultimate authority in my absence.”

“Rodolphus, you mean,” Sirius spits, remembering the only mask with colour.

Voldemort smiles. “Of course. But not all my Death Eaters know that is Rodolphus.”

Sirius wants to ask who has three lines. Whom he will have to take orders from. He won’t get an answer, but he’ll find out in time, anyway.

“The wings and alicorn-”

“Only for purebloods,” Sirius says, impatient. He’s not an idiot. He knows symbolism.

“Only for *old* blood,” Voldemort says, just so he can correct Sirius. “Not everyone should have the right to bear that mark. Not a first generation pureblood.”

Sirius snorts. “I always found my mother ridiculous when she’d go on about pureblood superiority. But I could ignore it when it was aimed at muggleborns and half-bloods. Yet when she went on about how even certain purebloods are less than others…” He shakes his head. “Why in the world would you take this as your sign when you’re not even a pureblood?”

“I don’t wear a mask,” Voldemort points out.

“Still-”

“I had to find something enticing for some of you of the *superior breed*, you understand.” Sarcasm drips from every word. “How can you convince proud Lucius to put on a mask if it doesn’t have something special on it?”

“Merlin’s beard,” Sirius mutters. “Wait!” He adds, realising something. “Rodolphus can’t have the wings and alicorn, if you adhere to those ancient rules.”

Rodolphus is old blood. But not pure *enough*. A muggleborn incident, some centuries ago. He is eight or nine generations pure. Sirius can't recall exactly. But one needs ten to be noble. And the Lestranges haven't reached that point again after the *mudblood stain*, as his mother calls it.

Sirius hates that he can remember something so absurd. But growing up in those circles, the Sacred Families always liked to take digs at each other, all trying to be the purest, the oldest.

"They all have a mudblood or a half-blood in their distant past. Some more distant than others," Sirius' father whispers in his ear, as they are sat at the high table, honoured guest at a wedding, observing Abraxas Malfoy turning all the shades of red when Avery not so subtly brings up a certain Muggle royalty that crossed paths with a Malfoy, long before. "All but us."

"But-" Sirius doesn't like to contradict his father, so he stops in time.

"Go on," his father encourages him.

"The burns on the tapestry-"

"They are no longer Blacks. They do not carry out name. The women that defiled our ancient blood do not pass our proud name to the abominations born of them."

"And the men?" Sirius inquires, softly.

His father hesitates. It shocks Sirius. His father never hesitates.

It only lasts a second.

"Gone," he says. "Before they could procreate."

"Rodolphus doesn't wear the symbols," Voldemort's voice drags him back to the present. "Lucius is terribly pleased about it; in time, you'll hear all about it, no doubt."

Sirius feels a little ashamed, because he, too, is pleased about that.

He doesn't even believe in this crap, but if Rodolphus' mask is the special one, the *authority*, Sirius is at least happy he has something Rodolphus hasn't.

"Your robe is charmed. That is why you have to wear this one, not just any black robe. It has glamorous in it; they won't allow anyone to guess your height or width properly."

Sirius frowns. Now that he thinks of it- yeah, they all look strangely alike, the Death Eaters.

"Otherwise Rodolphus' constitution would be a dead giveaway."

"True." Sirius nods. Few men are as tall and wide as him.

"And so would yours," Voldemort comments, eyes going over Sirius, from head to toe.

While not quite Rodolphus proportions, Sirius definitely stands out in a crowd.

He places the robe and mask on the coffee-table.

“Where are we going?”

Voldemort is still eyeing Sirius up and down, seemingly lost in thought.

If he tells me to change clothes, I’m going to spit in his face.

Of course, he knows he would do no such thing, were Voldemort to demand it.

But Sirius really doesn’t know how he’ll react, to be sent up to his bedroom, like a stubborn child that didn’t dress up for the occasion.

Should have just picked a fucking robe.

But no, Sirius had to go with his leather pants and his Sex Pistols hoodie.

He figured Voldemort is used to his muggle fashion by now; after all, Sirius makes it a point to always show up dressed like that for their meetings.

Voldemort stares for at least another half a minute, before he meets Sirius’ eyes.

“Shall we?”

“Does it have to be a mystery?” Sirius mumbles, heading to the door. “Is it so difficult to let me know beforehand?”

Voldemort doesn’t comment, catching up with him.

They get out of the house, cross Sirius’ unkept garden, until they are finally out of the range of his wards.

Voldemort extends a hand and it just pisses Sirius off, having to be taken places, as if he hadn’t passed his Apparation test.

A muscle goes off in his jaw, but he keeps his mouth shut and he takes Voldemort’s wrist, instead of his hand.

He squeezes harder than necessary.

“You will kill for me tonight,” Voldemort says, softly.

Sirius knows he’s not showing any reaction.

Years upon years of training, since early childhood- his body acts on its own.

He can feel his face closing off.

The shock is distant, muffled, kept at bay by some long ago learned coping mechanism.

There's some denial there, too. A sense of disbelief, as his mind can't really envision it.

He understands the words, but he just can't properly grasp them, not really.

"You will have to do unspeakable things," Dumbledore says, at the end of their final meeting before the deadline Voldemort gave him to accept his show. "Your mind, your being, your very soul will be tested. Most men cannot live with that burden."

"I am not like most men," Sirius boasts, arrogant.

The void of Apparition swallows them.

(-)

The ancient residence stands tall amongst the trees, long, winding towers reaching for the skies.

Sirius played in one of them, in what seems like another life.

He'd been in that tower, with Evan Rosier and Porus Parkinson, daring each other to jump on a moving broom, circling without a rider in the air.

Sirius almost did. He didn't fear. He couldn't fall. He couldn't get injured. His father was around, and nothing could happen to him with his father nearby, even if Sirius couldn't see him at the moment.

He almost jumped, but Regulus was crying, grasping Sirius' robe in his little fists and begging him not to.

The old Parkinson home has fierce blood wards. Not as powerful as Grimmauld, nothing is as powerful as that, but they should still hold any intruders out.

Sirius feels their magic enveloping him and Voldemort as they go through the gates.

It accepts them, welcomes them.

It must be a muggle. They're keeping a muggle inside the house and Voldemort will make me kill him.

But he knows it's not that. He knows it in his heart.

The air around him seems to know it, becoming thinner, making it hard for him to breathe.

The night is still as they stroll to the main entrance.

"You promised me a seat in the Wizengamot, in exchange for your brother," Voldemort comments, lightly, as he just opens the damn door, the door that should stop them, that

shouldn't just allow inside someone who will kill the owner of the house.

"He should be in his office," Voldemort talks like they're just going there for a meeting.

The portraits on the walls are silent, as still as the night. As quiet.

Their eyes are unseeing, opaque.

"To the right?" the bastard asks Sirius, with a smile.

Voldemort very well know where the office is. To prove it, he takes the right before Sirius answers.

But he had to remind Sirius that he'd been here as a little boy. That this is someone that welcomed Sirius in his house, fed him, gave him toys.

Parkinson is a blood purist of the worst kind, Sirius tries to hold on to that.

He tries to remember the fight the man had with Sirius's father.

"We should kill them all. Every single mudblood that steps foot inside Hogwarts should be burned alive, as their ancestors burned our women."

"Mudbloods are the lowest of the low," Sirius' father would say, calmly. "But they are magical, Janus. They are. They belong with us, even if only as a stepping stone for our society. Who do you want to sell you herbs in Diagon? Who do you want to clean tables at the Leaky Cauldron, or pick up Hippogriff shit at the Magical Reserves? Purebloods? I think not. Mudbloods have a place here, and a use."

But Janus Parkinson would not hear it, raging, red in the face, about stains in their bloodstream, about corruption of magic.

He is such a hard core purist that he'd never stooped speaking against Voldemort. He keeps at it, even years after the fierce Walburga Black learned to shut her mouth.

He gives inflammatory speeches in the Wiznegamot, declaring Voldemort a mudblood.

"And see? This is why we shouldn't let these people in our world. Look what they become. Terrorists, seeking to dismantle our country, to overthrow our government and take over the Sacred Twenty Eight."

Everyone keeps their distance. The elected seats of the Wizengamot hate his bigotry and his treatment towards muggleborns.

The inherited seats fear repercussion from a *certain* dark lord.

Parkinson is isolated, exiled, but he holds on to his seat and his stance on the matter.

He'd grown paranoid, too, rumour has it.

He only leaves his house to attend Wizengamot meetings.

He's safe at the Ministry, after all.

And he's safe in his ancient manor, protected by blood wards.

Not even mighty Voldemort can trample through blood wards that old. Not without leaving terrible destruction behind.

But Sirius can- he is of pure, ancient blood. He used to be a guest, and while Janus Parkinson must have restricted access to Lucius, Avery, Rosier and anyone else he suspects follows Voldemort- apparently he forgot to renounce Sirius' right to pass through those doors.

And if he brings a guest, well- the wards trust Sirius would not bring someone that intends the master harm.

Light comes from under the office door.

Sirius remembers pressing his ear to that door, trying to listen in to grown up conversations, so eager to grow up himself and be allowed inside.

Voldemort makes a gesture to it, inviting Sirius to open it.

"Do whatever you have to do in order to gain his trust," Dumbledore says. You can be the key to winning this war."

Sirius reaches for the knob and turns it.

Janus Parkinson is expecting them.

His old, wrinkled face, older even than Dumbledore's, is set with indignation.

After all, the wards would have let him know he has guests.

You could have fled, you stubborn old fool, Sirius thinks, hateful.

But he hadn't, and now Sirius- Sirius will have to-

No, he couldn't have fled, Sirius realises when the man tries to Apparate and cannot.

When he calls for a house-elf that doesn't come to his rescue.

The reality of what's happening is setting in, his brain catching up with the impending doom.

It makes Sirius dizzy. It makes his hands shake.

"Who betrayed me?" Parkinson demands, realising he's not getting out. "Who sold me to a filthy, no name mudblood?"

You batty old thing, Sirius thinks. *You brave motherfucker.*

“Your nephew.” Voldemort kills Parkinson, right there, with only two words.

Sirius can see the agonising pain in those old eyes, ravaged by cataract.

I’m only going to kill his corpse, Sirius tells himself.

“He is not as brave as you, old man,” Voldemort says, viciously. “These young generations…” An exaggerated sigh. “They don’t make them as they used to, do they? While he couldn’t weaken the wards, he at least put your house-elf to sleep and charmed the paintings in place.”

Parkinson grabs his cane and leans heavily on it as he scowls at Voldemort, who won’t stop talking.

“Young Porus seems to have forgotten about family values. Not quite ready to kill you himself, but happy enough to let me do it.”

“Get out of my house, you filthy creature. How dare you? Spilling noble blood left and right and yet saying you care about our ancient ways?”

Parkinson tries to stand straight, with as much pride as he can muster. He must be over one hundred years old, Sirius reckons.

But age never softened anyone from the Sacred Families.

It only makes them harder.

“You don’t deserve to lick the mud from my boots!”

Sirius can’t help but feel a lick of respect.

Parkinson knows there’s nothing left to do but die with dignity.

Voldemort looks at him with a blank face, nothing to be read on it. Even his eyes are impassive.

“I knew you would find it repulsive, someone of my *heritage* spilling your noble blood in your noble home. However, since I needed Mr Black to get through the wards... surely you won’t protest to him spilling your blood. I dare you to find someone with better pedigree. Should be an honour, really.”

Voldemort could kill him. Now that he is in the house, he doesn’t need Sirius.

But he won’t.

Parkinson’s eyes turn to Sirius, for the first time.

“I’d have thought at least you would have the spine to stand up to this impostor.”

Parkinson manages something very few people had before him.

Sirius feels ashamed.

You have to do this.

But does he? Sirius could choose honour; Sirius could turn to Voldemort, spit in his face and die a proud, unbent man.

He could choose that instead of living as a lackey.

I can't kill him, he thinks, desperate, holding his wand tightly.

Sirius killed before. Once.

A Death Eater he didn't recognise, that almost killed James. Sirius lured him away from the others and did what he had to do.

But that was in the heat of battle. It wasn't an old man.

It wasn't an execution.

"Your father must be rolling in his grave," Parkinson says, lip twisted in disgust. "How low the Blacks had fallen. We thought Orion strong, but how strong can a man be if he raises two cowards?"

Turns out, Sirius can kill him.

He takes advantage of the blind fury the words awaken in him; he lets it rule him.

Every anguish he felt in the past years, every slight to his family name that he couldn't punish, every injustice that befell him… Sirius lets it out.

Blood splatters all over the office, all over Sirius, as Parkinson's head detaches from the rest of him.

It happens fast. A second.

Sirius knows he'll never be the same again.

"Messy," Voldemort drawls, but his impassive face melts away. He sounds quite satisfied.

It's for the cause, a voice says, trying to reassure Sirius, to comfort him, calm his racing heart, push down the nausea.

It sounds like Dumbledore, but deep inside Sirius knows it's not.

Deep inside, Sirius knows it's a lie.

"He asked for it," Sirius hears himself speaking, though he can't feel his mouth moving.

His face is numb. A chill settles under his skin.

“The new head of House Parkinson will not appreciate blood in his office,” Voldemort says.

“The new head of House Parkinson deserves to be burned at the stake,” Sirius spits.

And they call Sirius a blood traitor. He left his family, but at least he didn’t set the scene so someone can murder his great uncle, like Porus apparently did.

“I can’t say I don’t agree, but Porus will be useful.” He steps over the body, still spraying blood, and bends to look at the head. “This one was much stronger and smarter than the ones that came after him.”

Voldemort does not want strong, smart people in charge of the Twenty-Eight.

He wants men that will bow to him or be bought by him. He wants young men, hungry for glory, easy to ensnare.

Voldemort pulls out his wand and Sirius watches, still numb, still nauseous, as the head knits back together, as blood retreats from the carpet and walls, back into the body.

“A heart attack, I think,” he says, conversationally. “He was quite angry all the time. No wonder his old heart gave up. Watch closely, Sirius. One day you might need to stage a crime scene, if you can’t keep your temper in check.”

(-)

Sirius expects something to happen when he gets back home and he’s alone with his thoughts. When he is finally out of Voldemort’s eyes.

But nothing happens.

The eery calm persists. He can’t think.

He goes to his bedroom, as in a trance, and sits on his bed.

You should wash. There must be some blood on you.

There must be. Sirius felt some droplets hit his face when… when it all happened.

I have to wash it off.

Only he doesn’t rise.

He sits on his bed, head bent, staring at the floor for hours on end.

(-)

Sirius doesn't want to tell Dumbledore.

To sit in that office, pinned by those all knowing blue eyes and say that he murdered-executed someone…

Surely, he expects it, Sirius reasons with himself.

"Do whatever it takes" he told Sirius, before sending him off to Voldemort.

Sirius did. Dumbledore can't complain about it, can he?

Murder was always on the table. After all, what good is a Death Eater that can't kill?

What better way to trap a man in eternal service than forcing him to murder someone?

Betraying Voldemort after the last night, means a sure Azkaban sentence for Sirius, too.

He shudders; somehow, he'd never thought about that possibility when agreeing to spy.

He's alright with death. He made his peace with it. But Azkaban, spending the rest of his life having to relieve the worst memories he has…

It won't get to that, he calms himself. *I'd kill myself before that happens*.

Dumbledore must have known Sirius will be asked to kill, eventually.

Is that why he sent me to spy, out of all people? Because he knew I could do it?

Sirius expected it, too. But he'd thought it would be a random Muggle, not an old member of the Sacred Twenty Eight.

Would a Muggle have been better? Would he have found it easier, killing a complete stranger, as opposed to a man Sirius can remember since childhood?

All sorts of memories come to the surface, things Sirius never thought of before.

That time when the old man laughed with Sirius' father, back in Grimmauld Place.

Or the time Sirius spilled pumpkin juice on his shirt, when he was four and he was frantically trying to wipe it off, knowing his mother would throw a fit- Parkinson found Sirius hiding in Nott's office and he'd used his wand to make Sirius' shirt pristine, winked at Sirius-

Stop. Just stop.

Sirius tries to remember the sneers, the insults, the patronising way in which Parkinson always talked about half-bloods and muggleborns.

The peace from the night before shattered.

He's restless, pacing around his living room, unable to sit.

Every time he blinks, he can vividly see the blood spraying.

(-)

"I killed Janus Parkinson," Sirius says, forcing himself to meet Dumbledore's eyes.

Sirius had to tell him. If he keeps secrets from him… it's a slippery slope, isn't it?

"Oh, Sirius."

He looks older than ever. As tired as Sirius feels.

By some miracle, there is no judgement.

Sirius describes what happened. He leaves out the Regulus part; makes it sound like Voldemort just took him to Parkinson and demanded Sirius kill him.

Maybe it would have happened, anyway. In fact, Sirius is quite sure Voldemort was planning on it; the thing with Regulus must have just sped things along, ensured Sirius' cooperation.

He talks with no inflection in his voice, completely detached from the memory.

Even after finishing the story, there is no judgement coming from Dumbledore. There's no pity on his face, either, and Sirius is glad for it.

"I know it's hard," Dumbledore says, after a prolonged silence.

"Do you?" Sirius interrupts him. "Have you ever killed someone?"

Dumbledore doesn't answer.

"Was this your first?" he asks, instead, and Sirius looks away.

Dumbledore knows it isn't. He must. After all, that Death Eater didn't just decide to drop dead on his own.

And Moody wasn't there on that mission, the only other possible culprit.

If there's one thing Sirius respects about Moody- the man doesn't hesitate to do what he must.

"Janus Parkinson was a dead man ever since he spoke against Voldemort," Dumbledore says. "He knew it, I knew it, Voldemort knew it. It was only a matter of time. It's Voldemort that killed him, never doubt it."

Convenient, isn't it? Easy, too.

Dumbledore is not wrong. Parkinson would have died regardless if Sirius refused to do it.

And yet Sirius killed him. He *chose* to kill him.

There was a choice, and he can't forget that. Unfortunately.

But he nods, because he doesn't want his old professor to absolve him.

"If you wish to step back, you only need to say it," Dumbledore continues.

"No."

Sirius will not turn back.

His brother needs him, above all other reasons.

Dumbledore spends more minutes sprouting platitudes at Sirius; wise, kind words that don't help against the chill in his heart.

You can't just talk away murder.

You can't sleep it off, either.

Sirius tries, but it doesn't work. He can't sleep.

He'd had a nightmare or two, after the Death Eater; he still dreams of that moment, here and there. But it doesn't sit nowhere near as heavily on his mind. Never did.

He can't even get drunk. He drinks, but he remains depressingly sober- he can still see Parkinson's face.

James barges into his house, days after Sirius stopped leaving it.

"What's the matter?" he asks, all worried. "What happened?"

Sirius can't tell him.

Dumbledore- Dumbledore is practical. Rational.

He might be-or tries to be- a good man, but he's a war leader. He understands sacrifices.

James won't.

"Can't I have a minute for myself?" Sirius snaps at him, when none of his excuses appease James. "Do we always have to be glued to the hip? Is that the way of it?"

James doesn't let the words upset him, even if Sirius never talks to him that way.

He doesn't leave even when Sirius retreats to his bedroom.

For hours, he can hear the other moving around on the first floor.

James is noisy. Claps and bangs and a string of swear words later, there's a knock on his door.

Sirius ignores it, but James comes in, anyway.

"I made you tea; the way you like it, with vodka. And something to eat."

He smiles at Sirius tentatively, showing him a plate of something unrecognisable.

Sirius accepts it, taking a bite out of morbid curiosity. He half hopes it might kill him.

He spits it out a second later.

"Well, I tried," James says, sitting at the edge of the bed. "Will you at least tell me why you have "toujours pur" on every goblet in the house? Why all…" He looks around the room, pushing his glasses on his nose. "This?"

"It's expected of me," Sirius answers, after washing down the awful taste with the tea. "Many things are expected of me now. Please, drop it and just let me wallow in misery for a bit."

"Only if you promise you'll come by tomorrow. We'll have Remus and Peter over. Lily is going to see her grandma for the night. It will be like old times."

Sirius accepts, just to get James out of the house.

The next day, he drags himself out of bed, not ready at all to face the world.

But he must.

He's not well enough to fake happiness, to force himself to be a carefree idiot, the way he did so many times in the past.

He can't force himself to be loud.

Peter says nothing, just peeking at Sirius when he thinks he isn't noticed.

It falls to James to be the clown, for once. To entertain them.

A hand on his shoulder pulls Sirius out of the hundred replay of the moment Parkinson's head severed from his body.

Sirius blinks and he's surprised to see himself standing in front of the sink in James' kitchen. The water is turned on. He remembers he'd come to get a glass of water.

It's Remus, saying Sirius' name, softly.

"Yeah?" He shuts the water off, but doesn't turn. Doesn't want to imagine what his behaviour might look like to Remus.

“Can I-”

Remus doesn’t finish.

And they used to talk so freely, once upon a time.

No awkward pauses, no loaded looks. No betrayal, or hurt, or suspicion.

“Are you alright?”

Sirius snorts.

“Stupid question,” Remus says, getting even closer. “It’s about the article this morning?”

Sirius never reads the newspapers if he can help it. He never had a subscription to the Prophet.

He shrugs.

“It’s alright to be sad, you know?” Remus says. He turns Sirius around, pulling insistently at his shoulders.

When they’re face to face, it feels like it used to, for a moment. Like the last years hadn’t happened.

Remus hugs him. Sirius bites his tongue, hard, until it bleeds, to stop the tears stinging his eyes.

He clings back, for a few seconds, allows himself the desperately needed comfort.

You’re letting him hug a murderer. Of course, his mind had to ruin it for him.

Sirius pulls back.

(-)

He’d barged into her house plenty of times, so Marlene just turns on her side and goes back to sleep.

Sirius looks everywhere for the damned newspaper, until he finds it under a cup of cold coffee, on the bathroom floor, near the toilet.

Marlene is such a slob. Just like him. Only now he has invisible house-elves keeping his house clean.

He sits on the edge of the tub and reads it.

It's easy to see the Prophet reported on Parkinson's death the previous days.

This article barely mentions him.

Instead-

'Are we witnessing the end of the so-called golden days of the Wizengamot?'

Underneath the title, an old picture, taken years before.

His father is in it, surrounded by his friends and colleagues.

Sirius swallows, choking. It's been so long since he'd seen his face.

Well, he sees it every day in the mirror, but it's not quite the same.

The shape of the eyes is a little different. His father wore his hair a bit shorter; he had a slight wave to it, as well.

Sirius' is straight, like his mother's.

And, of course, his father was always clean shaved. Some days, Sirius doesn't bother with it.

Sirius is taller than his father. He must be.

When- the last time his father was able to stand, Sirius was already his height.

And he'd grown another few inches since then.

Sirius knows this rationally, but his father looks so much *taller*. Larger than life. Sirius is nothing compared to him.

'Just months after Orion Black's death, we bury another member of the Wizengamot.

Porus Parkinson claimed his uncle's seat in the early hours of the morning, making him the fifth new addition to the Wizengamot, in just as many years.

In total, seven of the inherited seats are now held by wizards under the age of thirty.

The Black seat, vacant since the unexpected retirement of Orion Blacks, some years before his death, is also guaranteed to go to his son, Regulus Black, as soon as he finishes his education, making him the youngest member of the Wizengamont in history, at just eighteen years old.

Historians dispute whether this youthful takeover means we will progress as a society, if we will finally distance ourselves from old-fashioned ideas and the discrimination they carried along.

Others are more skeptical.

"Men as young as that shouldn't wield so much power. They might have honourable intentions, but youth often means rashness. While their relatives held antiquated beliefs, while it is possible their successors might be more lax, it is also possible they might be more radical, seduced by certain influences that older men know to avoid." Elphias Doge, long-time member of the elected section of the Wizengamot, is cautious about the future.'

Sirius trails his fingers over his father's face.

"Your father must be rolling in his grave."

He must be.

For a second, Sirius is almost glad his father hadn't lived long enough to see the Wizengamot fall to Voldemort, little by little.

(-)

"Mr Black, how may I help you?"

The secretary looks quite frightened to be addressing him.

Could be because he is a Black, but Sirius thinks it's more because he must look deranged.

Eyes red, after not sleeping for so long. Clothes rumpled.

A twitch developed in his jaw that would not go away. He probably smells of firewhiskey.

Few wizards and witches are around, so early. Sirius waited outside the Ministry all night, waiting for people to wake up and come to work.

"How do I file a claim to get my family's seat?"

(-)

His mark burns minutes after he arrives home from the Ministry.

It hurts very little before it settles into a pull.

Sirius raises the sleeve of his jumper to see it black as ink.

But it's Monday, he thinks, stupidly.

Sirius hurries to the bathroom and washes his face. He combs and braids his hair.

He can't look weak. He can't look bothered.

He puts on one of the robes Bella got for him and he stares in the mirror until he's satisfied his face betrays nothing.

His eyes are still irritated, clearly tired, but there's nothing to do about that.

He could cast a charm to make them look better, but that will only attract Voldemort's attention.

All in all, some ten minutes pass between the time his mark flared and the time he lets it pull Sirius into Apparition.

Sirius plans to test Voldemort's patience one day. To just not show up and see what happens.

One day, he will.

When he opens his eyes, he's standing in the gardens of the Lestrange Manor.

What now?

The sun is bright, upsetting his eyes.

The mark still guides him, like a beacon under his skin, like an unnatural intuition, towards the house.

He starts walking; on the main path he bumps into Lucius, looking harassed.

"Glad I'm not the only one late," the blond mumbles.

"You can always count on me to not show up on time," Sirius tells him.

Lucius walks fast, forcing Sirius to do the same.

He doesn't like the idea of scurrying to obey Voldemort, but it would be awkward, wouldn't it, to just let Lucius rush ahead of him.

No elf comes to greet them at the door. They just let themselves in, following the mark's call.

Well, Sirius is following Lucius, who seems like he's been called here before, because he doesn't hesitate on his way to Rodolphus' office, all the way in the west wing.

Some excitement blossoms into his heart. The first meeting with at least another Death Eater.

Some dread, too.

He doesn't know how adding someone else into the mix will change his dynamic with Voldemort.

As soon as they are in the office, Lucius instantly falls on one knee.

For an absurd second Sirius thinks he tripped. He's about to laugh when he realises the other people in the room are all staring at Sirius, not Lucius.

Bella gestures with her eyes, panicked.

One of Rabastan's eyebrows lifts in surprise.

Rodolphus simply looks displeased.

It's then than it registers to Sirius that Lucius is kneeling *voluntarily*.

And these people apparently expect him to do the same.

No. His mind rebels at the thought. *No way in all the hells, magical or muggle.*

I'm a Black, I don't kneel.

He'd forgotten the stories, he'd forgotten Moody telling them in Order meetings that apprehended Death Eaters say they always have to kneel when seeing Voldemort.

He'd forgotten it because Voldemort dismissed it when Sirius brought it up the night he took the mark.

He forgot because he'd been seeing Voldemort for months and not once was he required to kneel.

Shocked, he ignores the Death Eaters and turns to look at Voldemort.

His eyes are more brown than red, due to all the light around, coming through Rodolphus' floor to ceiling windows.

However, those eyes are fixed on Lucius.

And before Sirius can panic any more-

"Rise."

"I apologise for the delay," Lucius says.

Lucius Malfoy. One of the proudest men Sirius knows. Kneeling *and* apologising. To a half-blood.

What did you do to them?

"Father is visiting," he goes on, and he takes the free seat next to Voldemort.

Rodolphus is seated at Voldemort's right, with Bella next to him.

And now Lucius on his left, Rabastan immediately after.

Why do I do these things? Sirius questions himself as he walks towards the other end of the table.

A long table.

What does it serve, really?

Sirius doesn't know, but he can't help himself. If he can't right next to Voldemort, he won't sit further away, like a lowly servant, the least important guest, the newcomer.

He sits at the other head of the table, as if he and Voldemort are equals.

He doesn't care about things like this in Order meetings; he doesn't care because no one cares there. For them, it's just seats, meaningless, so everyone just does what they like.

But here it is different.

It always was. Unspoken rules. Who sits where, who is served the meal first, and several other seemingly inconsequential details.

Rabastan's other eyebrow lifts. He looks like a spooked owl.

Lucius sighs.

Rodolphus refuses to even look his way.

Bella giggles.

"No matter," Voldemort excuses Lucius. This time, his eyes are fixed on Sirius. "It isn't anything urgent." He drums his long fingers on the table. "I thought it is time we welcome Sirius, officially."

Are you going to introduce us? Sirius almost asks. Thankfully, he doesn't. "Such a cold welcome," he drawls, when no one says anything.

"We'll crack a champagne open later," Bella answers him with a smile.

"Lovely," Sirius spits.

This can't be the entire inner circle. Sirius is convinced there are more of them.

But these are the Death Eaters Sirius already knew about; he knew, and he kept silent. Voldemort trusts Sirius around them, but not the others.

Not yet. Patience. We'll get there.

"Since you are here." Voldemort turns his gaze to Lucius. "Is the matter of the Wizengamot settled?"

"Almost," Lucius answers. "I am having dinner with Greengrass tomorrow."

“It is paramount that he accepts.”

“I’ll promise him my firstborn, if I have to,” Lucius assures Voldemort.

Nice family values.

Voldemort smiles. “I should hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Lucius shrugs. “A betrothal between our families wouldn’t be an unwelcome outcome.”

Rodolphus snorts.

Voldemort turns to Rabastan, who slides deeper into his chair, as if seeking, uselessly, to avoid that gaze.

“The matter we discussed?” Voldemort enquires.

“Going well, my lord. We’ll get…” he sneaks a look at Sirius, fast. “We’ll get it sooner than expected. By the end of the month.”

Voldemort nods, apparently pleased. “Take your brother with you when it’s time.”

“I can go,” Bella volunteers, staring lovingly at Voldemort.

It makes Sirius sick.

Voldemort smiles at her like she’s some amusing pet, but he doesn’t answer her.

And then it’s Sirius’ turn. Like a sick variation of pass the quaffle, only with much higher stakes.

“Was there an Order meeting to discuss Parkinson’s death?”

“No.”

“Or maybe Dumbledore just didn’t invite you.” Rodolphus speaks for the first time. He’d been friendlier, or as friendly as he can be, when they had dinner at Malfoy Manor.

“Even so,” Sirius barks. “I would have found out from other members, had a meeting been called.” He narrows his eyes. “There was no meeting.”

“Did he ask you in private if you know anything about it?” Voldemort asks, cutting over Rodolphus just as the redhead was opening his mouth again.

“Yeah.” Sirius resists the urge to cross his arms.

“And?”

They’re all staring at him now.

“I told him I killed Parkinson.”

Silence.

“Interesting choice,” Voldemort says. He tilts his head. “You could have blamed it on me.”

Sirius meets his eyes and keeps his gaze.

“And what did he have to say about it?”

“He offered me a lemon drop,” Sirius answers.

Rodolphus gives a bark of laughter.

Voldemort is not amused.

“What you would expect,” Sirius continues. “That it was your fault, that I had to do it to gain your trust-all of it.”

Sirius draws his shoulders back. “Since we’re all here... I might as well tell you. This morning I started the process to claim my seat in the Wizengamot.”

They’ll find out soon, anyway. One of Lucius’ spies might be writing to him as they speak.

Voldemort shows no reaction.

Lucius seems surprised, but happy.

“Good. We really needed another vote.”

“Ahm,” Sirius rubs the back of his neck. “I’m not-I’ll need time to familiarise myself with the proceedings and all. So I won’t be voting for a while. Until I understand-”

Lucius frowns. “Until you learn, I can tell you how- I can teach you how to vote. Explain the-”

“No.”

“So you’re blocking it,” Rodolphus observes.

“Why would you-”

“That’s alright, Lucius,” Voldemort interrupts him. “We have Porus.”

“It’s still going to be tight, Dumbledore has more people-”

“You’ll make do, I am sure. You never disappointed me so far.”

No pressure, Sirius thinks as he observes a muscle going off in Lucius’ face.

“You should have allowed your brother to get it, if you don’t plan to use it.” Rodolphus’ eyes roam over Sirius’ face.

“It’s mine,” Sirius spits at him. “Not my brother’s.”

“Speaking of Regulus,” Voldemort starts to say and Bellatrix tenses, avoiding Sirius’ eyes.

You little bitch.

“I’ve decided that he is more useful as an informant.”

Sirius holds his breath.

“If he takes a job at the Ministry, he will report to you directly, Lucius. And only to you. He’s too young to be involved in more… *strenuous* activities.”

Sirius breathes in relief.

Far too soon.

“For now, at least,” Voldemort adds.

He’s going to hold Regulus over my head forever.

Rabastan looks confused. “Regulus is with us?”

Lucius and Bella had gone very still.

“He is. It was supposed to be a secret. Yet Sirius found out, even if I explicitly forbade it. I wonder how that happened, since he doesn’t talk with his brother and only three of you knew about Regulus’ mark.”

It is clear he doesn’t suspect Rodolphus, his most trusted man. Brown- red eyes turn to Bella, the most likely culprit and Sirius panics-

“I let it slip,” Lucius speaks into the extremely tense silence.

His eyes are hard, closed off.

Lucius was always sharp. He must know Bella told Narcissa. He might imagine Narcissa told Sirius.

Voldemort turns to him.

“You let it *slip*?”

Lucius never opens his mouth before he calculates every word. Voldemort must know this.

“A mistake.”

Bella isn’t meeting Sirius’ eyes, staring at Lucius. “You fool!” she hisses.

“I don’t allow mistakes,” Voldemort says, and isn’t it remarkable how much menace he can radiate, even if his tone is so soft. “See to it that there are no more leaks. Or I shall be

displeased."

"My lord," Lucius lowers his head.

Sirius wonders if Bella would sit there so serenely, had she figured out Voldemort is threatening Narcissa?

Because he is.

However, Bella seems to accept it truly was Lucius running his mouth to Sirius.

(-)

"Did you ever kill?" he asks his father.

Orion Black certainly looked capable of murder.

He was never violent with Sirius or Regulus. He'd punish them severely, especially Sirius, difficult child he had been, but it was never physical.

Their mother was the one to slap Sirus. Their grandfather was the one to spank Sirius until Sirius told his father about it.

"If you ever hurt my son again, I will cut your arm off." His father spoke in that calm way of his, but the words shocked Sirius, as much as they reassured him.

They shocked Sirius' grandfather, too. He never again spanked him.

Sirius never feared his mother, no matter if she'd throw a vase at his head, from time to time.

But they all feared his father. He never did anything to them, but he always looked like he *might*.

And just the promise that was in the air that one day he will lose his composure, was enough to keep them all in check.

Regulus hid from him as much as he could.

His mother wailed and slammed doors with too much force, but when his father reached the end of his patience, a word was enough for him and she'd make herself scarce.

"Darling," he'd say, warningly, tone low, jaws locked tight, and that would be that. The end of all resistance.

Sirius adored him. And even when he was a bit afraid, he didn't have the option Regulus had to just hide.

He was his father's heir; he was needed at his side, to learn all the lessons he can about what he means to be head of the family.

Yet he minded his mouth. It was like his father was an antidote for Sirius' brewing anger and out-of-control temper.

He always had so much trouble containing it; he never could shut up in fights with his mother, even when he tried. Any slight form her, however small, and he'd lose it.

There was no temper with his father. There was anger sometimes, rebelliousness, but it was always so much easier to shut up when it was his father reprimanding him, and not his mother.

"Did you?" he asks again. "Did you ever watch life leaving another man's eyes?"

The stars don't answer.

Sirius drinks on the roof, precariously close to its edge.

He imagines his father must be angry. For some reason, he liked Parkinson.

He'd surely protest the most that his son is taking orders from a half-blood.

Both his sons.

"I'll take care of Reggie," Sirius promises the fading stars when the sun starts to rise. "I fucked up before, but I will take care of him from now on."

They're vacationing in Greece when three chimeras break loose from a crazed breeder.

In the pandemonium, as the animals wreck chaos through the small magical village, his mother yells, a little further away.

She's clasping Regulus' hand and her eyes frantically go over the crowds.

"SIRIUS!"

And Sirius runs towards her- even if one chimera is dangerously close. His father comes out of nowhere, grabbing Sirius and Disapparating on the spot.

"NO!" Sirius turns, yelling at his father for the first time in his life, when they arrive safely on the beach where their vacation house stands.

"You can't leave mum and Reg-"

"She's not an idiot, she'll Apparate away, too," his father answers.

Only Sirius worries she might delay looking for him.

She wouldn't, he tries to console himself. She hates me. She wouldn't be that concerned.

“We should have stayed together-”

“No. When there is mortal danger, us three have to be separated,” his father says, so calm.

Nothing ever frightens him, nothing seems to phase him and Sirius tries his best to emulate him, to control his panic, to mold his face into that blank expression.

“In case something happens to me, you must stay alive. In case something happens to both of us, your brother must survive, to carry on our name.”

“Is that all we are to you?” Sirius snaps, already failing in his convictions to stay cool and unaffected.

The heir and the spare. We’re also your children, he thinks, desperate.

But he fidgets under that unflinching, icy stare. It chases away Sirius’ anger.

“We must place duty above our feelings, Sirius.”

“I understand,” he says, though he doesn’t. He doesn’t understand how cold someone must be to think so practically, under the circumstances. “But you should have taken Regulus with you,” he dares to suggest. “He doesn’t have a wand. I can look after myself.”

After all, Sirius just got his wand before they left for Greece. And Bella allowed him to use her own, taught him curses long before he turned eleven.

His father takes his chin between his long fingers, raising his head.

“You are more important,” he says, simply.

Sirius is upset on behalf of Regulus, but he can’t help but be pleased at the words, too.

After all, Regulus has their mother’s love. It’s obvious.

Sirius always consoled himself that at least he has his father.

Their mother Apparates beside them, along with his brother.

Regulus is crying, clinging to her, and Sirius is invariably jealous when seeing them so close.

But for the first time, his mother pries herself from Regulus’ embrace and rushes to Sirius.

She hugs him. It’s been so long since she did that. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Sirius hugs back, fiercely. He can hate her later.

But he can enjoy that moment.

He wants to whispers that he loves her, actually, that he’s sorry he was rude the other day, that-

“Don’t smother him,” his father says and his mother lets Sirius go, rising to her full height.

“Bad enough you spoiled Regulus until you turned him weak.” He shakes his head, watching Regulus. “Nine years old and crying like a little girl.”

“And what are you turning Sirius into?” his mother hisses and off she goes, lost to her screams, Sirius and Regulus forgotten.

He makes his way to his brother, taking his hand. “Stop crying, we’re fine.”

“I thought I’d die,” Regulus sniffles on his neck. “They were trampling over people and-

“Don’t be silly. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

“You weren’t there,” Regulus says, holding Sirius tightly.

Regulus always feels safe when Sirius is beside him. His little brother’s trust in him never wavers, even when sometimes Sirius is a little cruel and plays pranks on him.

“I’m always with you.” Sirius draws him away from his mother’s increasing screams and from their father’s silence. “Look,” he says, going closer to the sea. He points to the dog star. “See? I’m always with you, no matter where you are.”

Regulus keeps crying.

“Stop it, you know father doesn’t like it. Blacks don’t cry.”

They sit on the cold sand, listening to the waves, until Regulus finally calms.

Their parents are long gone by then, taking the fight inside their vacation house.

(-)

Regulus sees him from far away, as he’s coming from the path connecting Hogwarts to Hogsmeade.

Sirius could have snuck up on him, but he decided against it. He wanted to give Regulus time to decide if he wants to speak to Sirius.

Barty Crouch Jr. talks animatedly, not looking where he’s going, holding a newspaper and showing Regulus something in it.

But Regulus is staring at Sirius.

Fuck, but he’s grown. How is it possible he’d grown so fast in under a year?

Last Sirius saw him, before he finished his seventh year of schooling, Regulus was still trapped in that awkward phase between a child and a young man.

Not anymore.

He's thin. He always was, but he looks even thinner.

"You'll never be enough as Heir Apparent!" Sirius yelled at him, shortly before he finished with Hogwarts. *"Look at you! Less, in every way."*

Regulus looks like a softer, quieter copy of Sirius.

They were both aware of it their entire lives.

Once upon a time Regulus used to love it, smiling proudly when someone would comment how much he looks like his older brother.

Sirius always hated it. Hated how his mother could just choose Regulus, who looked like Sirius, but was a *good boy*. A fine replacement.

Bet Regulus hates it now, too. Perhaps that is why he cut his hair short, to lessen the similarities.

Unsurprisingly, Regulus returns his eyes to the newspaper, though his body is all stiff.

He walks right past Sirius.

Leave, just leave.

But maybe Regulus thinks Sirius is there for some other reason. Maybe that's why he doesn't stop-

Yeah, right.

"Regulus."

His back gets even stiffer, but he doesn't stop. Crouch does, turning his head, eyes widening when he sees Sirius.

Regulus grabs his elbow and drags him along.

It pisses Sirius off.

What happened to giving him a choice, huh?

He walks fast, catching up with them before they can reach Hogsmeade.

He stops in their path.

Try to ignore me now.

“Piss off,” he sneers at Crouch.

The boy looks between Sirius and Regulus.

“Reg?”

“I said, piss off!” Sirius barks.

Crouch remembers some of Sirius’ curses, because he hesitates for another second and leaves.

“Loyal friends you’ve got,” he tells Regulus. “Always have your back, don’t they?”

Why are you such an arse? You came here to talk to him.

“Oh, like Potter had yours, when he wouldn’t even look at you?” Regulus hisses, a pink hue on his cheeks.

Well, well. He cultivated some venom, his baby brother.

Don’t get mad, don’t get mad.

But he’s already mad, remembering those awful days after the incident with Snape and the Shack.

So he stays silent, afraid he’ll say something worse.

Regulus stares at him.

He’s not quite as tall as Sirius, but close enough. Closer than he used to be.

“What do you want?” Regulus demands, after seconds pass that feel like hours.

Isn’t that the question of the century?

“I-”

Regulus frowns when Sirius can’t come up with anything.

He knows that never happens.

“I just wanted to see you. Make sure you’re alright,” Sirius answers.

He cringes, inwardly.

Regulus snorts. “You could have seen if I was alright or not, at father’s funeral.”

“Reg-”

“Shut up! How dare you- how could you?! Father!”

“Mum wouldn’t have wanted me there,” Sirius says between clenched jaws.

“Like you ever cared what she wanted. You didn’t come! How could you not come?”

The owl arrived in the middle of the night. It found Sirius at a party thrown by one of Marlene’s brothers.

“Father died. We’ll bury him Thursday. I know… I know it’s hard for you to be there with mum, but please, come. I can’t do this alone. I can’t stand there at the head of the coffin and be the Black Heir everyone expects to see. I can’t.

I need you, Sirius.

Please.”

“He’s been dead for years!” Sirius says, stubborn.

His father wasn’t there anymore, as far as Sirius is concerned. His father was gone before Sirius ran away.

Truth was, Sirius couldn’t go to the funeral, because he couldn’t be the Black Heir either. He wouldn’t have been able to stand at the head of the coffin, head straight, face blank. He would have broken apart, and all those snobs, all those snakes, would have been glad of it.

He would have shamed his father’s memory.

Because Sirius did break. Even if his father had been as good as dead for years, even if there was some relief that his body finally caught up with his mind, when Sirius read that letter, something in him shattered.

He’d climbed on the roof and wept like a baby, with music and laughter coming from under him.

Marlene found him at noon the next day.

“Maybe for you.” Regulus looks so upset. “You weren’t there to see him struggling to breathe, you weren’t there to change him or hold his hand through the night. He was alive-”

“Stop!” Sirius warns him.

He had been there. For weeks on end, he had been right there at his father’s side, refusing to leave the room, refusing to eat or sleep or part with him.

Refusing to accept what was happening, hoping against hope his father will just rise some day.

Regulus’s face is red with anger, eyes sparkling.

“He wouldn’t respond to anything, he couldn’t see us, couldn’t hear us, he couldn’t talk. And yet, in the dead of night, he’d struggle awfully and if you’d bend close enough to his mouth,

you could hear it. *'Sirius'*."

His vision sways. Crippling pain spreads from his chest; adrenaline rushes in his veins, pumping too much blood, too fast, straight to his brain.

"I have *nothing* to say to you." Regulus' voice comes as if from far away, even if he's still right in front of Sirius.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I would love to hear your thoughts!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bright flashes of colour; loud laughter, overcrowded rooms.

Music, heavy drums, a deep bass vibrating inside Sirius' chest.

Nauseating perfumes, sweat, alcohol, smoke.

The taste of iron and salt and pain.

Bodies pressing against him, blurry faces blending together, voices ringing as one.

Yet he can still see his father every time he closes his eyes. He can hear him whispering Sirius's name.

So Sirius drinks more, snorts more of that white powder a muggle man gives him.

More, more, more.

(-)

"- bloody outrageous, even for you. Fuck if I know why I put up with this shit. Pettigrew, don't just stand there!"

Marlene's voice comes as if from a great distance. Her skinny arms try to lift him, but fail, and Sirius drops back on what he believes to be a pavement.

"Marlene, those law-men are heading our way." Peter. That's Peter. Sirius is almost certain.

What's he doing here? Where am I?

"Brilliant!" Marlene hisses. "Fucking brilliant; in the middle of muggle London, you complete and utter arse!"

His head hurts something awful.

"I can't see," he mumbles, trying to open his eyes, but they won't. It's like they've been glued shut.

When he tries to lift his hand, he feels pain shooting all over his arm.

“No, officer, thank you, we’re fine.”

“He doesn’t look fine.” A male voice comes closer. “We’ve had complains about someone that-”

“Confundus!”

“Have a good night, Miss!”

Sirius loses consciousness.

(-)

He wakes up in his bed. He smells of dried blood and vodka. This time, when he tries to open his eyes, they obey him.

His head is pounding, and it’s only made worse when he moves it to the side.

Marlene is curled in an armchair beside his bed, hugging her long legs to her chest.

She has a hard look about her, terribly severe.

It’s not like she didn’t drag me home from shady places before.

Sirius sits up cautiously. His chest is caked with dried blood; he has chunks of memories of fighting with someone, a fist connecting with the side of his face-

He can’t quite remember where or why. The last clear memory he has is his brother’s angry face. Everything that comes after that is fractured, of a hazy quality.

“Four days, Black! No one could find you for four fucking days.”

His mind is sluggish; he doesn’t know what day it is-

“Is it Tuesday?” he asks, throwing the sheet off his bed. What if he missed his *date* with Voldemort? That would be bad.

It dawns on him he’s only in his underpants. Panic grips his heart and for a second he doesn’t understand why; it’s not like Marlene hasn’t seen every inch of him-

He looks down at his uncovered left arm.

His head snaps up, and he meets her eyes.

“Funny you didn’t suggest we get *that* tattooed together.”

Sirius hears the fury in her voice.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He stares at her and she stares right back.

“I know you’re not the brightest bint in the world, but why would you stay in a room with a Death Eater?” he spits out, because he feels threatened; he’s defensive and for him defence always manifests through hostility.

He gets out of the bed, quickly. Or as quick as it’s possible with his headache and unsteady limbs.

She stays where she is.

When he sees she left his wand on his bedside, within his reach, he can’t quite believe it.

He spots a pair of jeans on the floor; they’re stained with blood, but he puts them on.

“What’s going on, Sirius?”

At that moment, he can’t remember any other time when she’d used his first name instead of Black.

“What day is it?”

She doesn’t answer.

Sirius grabs his wand and casts a Tempus spell.

Tuesday. He’s not late *yet*; if he Apparates in the next minute, he can make it-

“Are you going to fucking tell me-”

“Was Peter with you?” Another flash of panic. “I think I remember his voice-”

“Sirius! What is that shit on your arm-”

“Did he see it?”

She stands, unfurls herself from the armchair. In the blink of an eye, she’s in his face.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on!” she demands, voice shaking.

“I think it’s self explanatory, really,” he barks at her.

“It isn’t!”

“Oh, yes, you must be very surprised,” Sirius spits out.

She pushes him hard, her hands leaving red imprints on his chest. “Don’t pull that shit with me! I’m not Hestia or Gideon or whoever else. You are the least likely man in the world to bear that mark!”

It hurts to hear it. The anguish in her voice, her faith in him, it’s painful.

She should run away screaming. He should have woken up in a Ministry holding cell.

“Marlene,” he says, and now it’s his voice that is shaking.

His mark burns, turns a deep shade of black.

Her eyes are drawn to it.

He’s late.

He feels the same faint pull he’d felt last he was summoned.

“I’ve got to go,” he whispers.

He’s in so much shit. Marlene knows, maybe Peter; he can’t remember the last four days, and now Voldemort is calling him.

She swallows.

“Sirius, please! Please-”

He takes her hand. She doesn’t flinch away from him like she *should*.

“Do you trust me?”

He hears the vulnerability in his tone, and he despises it.

He gave her no reason to trust him, ever. She hardly knows him. They had only gotten closer in the past six months-

No one trusts him besides James and Peter.

“Did Peter see it?”

The mark burns again, harder, comes with sharp pain.

“No, I was alone when I undressed you. He went to tell Potter we found you-”

“Can you stay here?” he pleads. “Can you wait for me to return?”

It’s huge, what he’s asking.

“I can’t do this right now,” he tries to explain.

“I can see,” she says, coldly, looking at the mark.

“Will you wait?”

Silence. The burn intensifies, pins and needles all over his left forearm.

Impatient fucker.

Sirius lets go of her hand and he hastily searches through the armoire for a t-shirt.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he says, looking at her as he heads to the door, pulling the T-shirt over his head. “At worst, I’ll be back around midnight.”

She’s a tall woman, but she looks awfully small right that second, dwarfed by his expensive furniture, with a desperate expression on her usually harsh face.

Sirius turns and runs down the stairs.

His Apparition is less smooth than usual. He stumbles out of the air, almost collapsing on the floor of the cabin.

It’s only through a miracle that he remains standing.

Voldemort is siting two feet away from him, one of his hands resting on the table.

Sirius doesn’t think he can deal with him, just then. He should say something, offer an apology, but he can’t. He can’t make the words come out of his mouth.

One of these days, you’ll die in this stupid cabin.

“I know you are not one for respectable clothing, but you are more disheveled than usual,” Voldemort offers after a few moments of silence.

He doesn’t sound angry. Sirius never heard him angry, though, so how would he know how that sounds like?

“I was in a scuffle with a muggle. Possibly more than one. Didn’t have time to clean up properly.”

Voldemort’s eyes travel over Sirius, from head to toe.

“You were healed,” he comments.

It is not a question, so he doesn’t answer it. Marlene must have healed him.

Sirius thinks he remembers being run over by a car at some point.

“Those are professional healer charms clinging to you.”

“Yeah,” Sirius says sharply, hoping to cut this line of questioning. “Good as new.”

Voldemort tilts his head to the side, eyes still roaming all over Sirius.

Sirius feels like he's about to throw up. He's dizzy, his head still throbs painfully, made only worse by the Apparition, and he has to talk to Marlene soon. He doesn't know what he'll say or-

"Are you aware there are people looking for you?"

Voldemort has this odd expression on his face. Sirius doesn't know what to make of it.

"Yes," Sirius answers. He imagines James was, and clearly Marlene and Peter. "But how would *you* know?"

After all, his friends are all very unlikely to have told Voldemort.

"It was in the paper."

Sirius blinks at him, surprised. "Huh?"

Voldemort laughs. It looks like he hadn't meant to; it sounds natural, without that undercurrent of *wrongness* that usually colours everything that comes out of his mouth.

"Sit," he says and Sirius does, because standing does not agree with him at all.

He's grateful for the glass of water that appears on the table, too.

He is parched.

He gulps the water down fast, and it refills.

"Potter went to the Aurors to declare you missing."

"No way!" Sirius stares at him, astonished. "Why would he do something so silly?" Sirius asks himself, but it is Voldemort that answers.

"Because you were *missing*."

"Listen, I've been 'missing' plenty of times before." It's certainly not the first time Sirius loses track of time while drunk. "James knows how it goes-"

"Ah, but were you 'spying' on me on those occasions?"

Fuck! James must have been worried sick. He must have thought I got murdered.

Great, as if he needs more reasons to feel like shit.

"The Aurors know you were attacked by Death Eaters some months before," Voldemort smirks, referring to their duel that destroyed Sirius' previous house "so they took your disappearance seriously. Even Dumbledore is concerned, according to my sources."

"Oh, gods. The sermon I'll get!" Sirius puts his head in his hands.

He has to face Marlene and fix that mess somehow; James will be quick to forgive him but Dumbledore will never let him live this down.

He told Sirius, so many times that he can't carry on as he used to, after he agreed to spy on Voldemort.

"The trouble you cause, without even trying to. Astonishing."

"I've got talent," Sirius mumbles.

Voldemort laughs again. He really is enjoying himself.

"At least you weren't worried," Sirius says, lifting his head. "I'm *wounded.*"

Voldemort leans back on the chair, observing Sirius with those sharp, creepy eyes of his.

"Bellatrix told me she heard from your brother about a talk you two had."

Sirius tenses. All those words, the pain, Regulus' furious expression. He can't deal with it. He can't.

He'd rather have to worry about Marlene and Dumbledore.

"She seemed convinced you're out on a drunken rampage."

"Good to be predictable."

"She recalled a time you got arrested. She mentioned you were sixteen? She had to come and take you out of a Muggle police station."

"That was fun," Sirius says, after drinking more water.

He's not sarcastic. It really had been fun. Sirius called Lily, using the muggle phone. She wasn't yet their friend, but she was the only person he knew that had a phone.

He'd memorised her number by heart because he'd spent a lot of time at pay-phones with James during the summer, who kept calling to hear her voice, the little stalker.

And he'd told Lily he'd been arrested and if she would please contact James, ask him to owl Bellatrix to come get him, because Bellatrix was the only adult that could be relied upon to help him without telling anyone else.

They arrested her, too, when she walked in and demanded they let him go, without presenting any of those documents they use to prove identity. But Bella had her wand and no Trace on it.

They escaped during the night.

"Have you looked in a mirror?" Voldemort asks, pulling Sirius out of the memory.

"Not recently, no."

“You’re in no state to duel. Go home.”

Sirius blinks, surprised.

Dumbledore told Sirius Voldemort will be patient with him in the beginning, but surely this is a bit much. And it’s been *months* already.

“You’re free to tell Dumbledore you were with me these past few days. Tell him we went to Scotland, and I killed a man named McIntosh. Tell him I retrieved a roll of parchment and a red wand from him.”

Sirius narrows his eyes, suspicious. “Why?”

Voldemort’s lips pull at the corners into a slight smile.

“I remember far too well Dumbledore’s sermons, as you referred to them. While I cannot say Muggles had ever arrested me, I am sure it is preferable to being berated in his office. You have my sympathies.”

(-)

Marlene is still there when Sirius returns.

A part of him is very shocked she stayed.

She’s perched up on the armchair, big dark circles under her eyes, only made worse by her ruined makeup. Sirius feels guilty.

How did we get so close? When?

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Just a quick fuck, here and there. Just fun.

Sirius kneels beside the armchair. When he takes her hand, she doesn’t flinch back, just watches him with her hard eyes, though Sirius can see the hurt inside them.

He tells her what really happened that night when he ended up in the hospital, claiming Death Eaters attacked him.

What followed.

It’s even scarier that the fear in her eyes doesn’t go away when she learns he’s a spy, and hasn’t suddenly turned into a fanatic.

“I kinda figured it was something like this,” she whispers.

How would she? Why is she the only one in the Order, besides his best mates, to know him?

Even Remus- if Remus saw the mark, he'd jump to a different conclusion than "he's a spy".

"Thank you," Sirius says, which is not something he utters often, unless it is filled with cold politeness or sarcasm. "For waiting and-"

"Fuck, Sirius! You're such an idiot! What would you have done if you'd found me with a dark mark on my arm, huh? Just throw me to the Aurors without asking for an explanation first? Of course I waited, you fool!"

Sirius knows many others would have done just that. People are so paranoid, the war is getting so vicious, that some seem ready to cast Sirius to the Aurors without even seeing his dark mark.

He needs to talk with James, with Dumbledore. He needs to talk to the Aurors and let them know he's fine.

But he doesn't want to leave her just yet, doesn't want to let go of her hand.

"It's fine, don't look so upset," he says.

"How is it fine? You're gonna *die*!" she snaps, her voice shaking. "And you're not supposed to die first!"

"I remember. Someone has to be there to dress your corpse in leather and red shoes."

She slaps his shoulder. "This is no joke-"

"Marlene, we're in a war. Most of us will die in the next couple of years. I just increased my chances a bit."

"It's one thing to - battle, Death Eaters- just- a chance to survive - but *Voldemort*? I don't want you to die in some strange room, surrounded by enemies, killed just because you told Voldemort to go fuck himself or something stupid-"

"I already told him that and here I am, alive."

Marlene closes her eyes, her fingers squeezing around Sirius', tightly.

"Sometimes I fucking hate Dumbledore," she says, after a brief silence.

"I hate him all the time, really. But this isn't his fault. This is on me. Voldemort set his sight on me and it wouldn't have ended well, whatever I would have chosen. Dumbledore only bought me some more time to live and be useful. And speaking of the old man, I have to tell him I'm alive."

"What happened? I've never seen you in that state, and Merlin knows I've seen you in plenty of *states*. But this- beaten up, drunk out of your mind, high, bags of that white stuff Muggle snort in your pockets-

"Noth-"

“Black!”

“Regulus. We had a chat about father.”

Marlene bites her lip.

She knows family. She gets family. Marlene comes from a big one; while not as ancient as the Blacks, not as powerful, she knows of pureblood traditions and family magic. She knows how it feels to lose someone that was always there and then isn’t anymore.

Marlene was the one to find Sirius on her rooftop, crying and clutching the letter from Regulus announcing his father’s death.

She nods, not needing to know more details.

“Is Lestrange a Death Eater?”

“I can’t- Marlene, I can’t talk about that.”

She shakes her head. “Yeah, yeah. I know. But he must be. He just- he has to be a Death Eater.”

Months before, when they ran into Rodolphus on the streets, Marlene stared at his left arm so intensely, as if she believed that if she looked hard enough, she could see the mark through his robe.

Rodolphus has a reputation. Worse than Sirius, really, and that’s saying something.

In those circles, before Sirius reached his teenage years, Rodolphus held the title of problem child. *Hot head. Violent.*

Sirius remembers his father and other patriarchs struggling to keep Rodolphus in check, out of Azkaban, covering up his blunders, throwing galleons around to make suspicions about dead muggleborns go away.

And that was before Voldemort, when Sirius was just a child and Rodolphus an angry, *angry* teenager, barely out of Hogwarts.

Even so, the rumours spread and when people first heard of a dark lord gaining power in the shadows, many thought Rodolphus was ‘*this Voldemort lunatic’*. That was before people grew too afraid to say the name, before Voldemort showed up in a skirmish and killed seven Aurors with one wave of his wand.

“Be careful, Sirius. Please.” Marlene bends over the armrest, her hands gentle on his face. “I know you don’t do careful, but-”

“I grew up with these people. I- I know how to handle myself. How to handle them.”

This is why Dumbledore sent him to spy.

Everyone knows a part of Sirius belongs there, no matter how hard Sirius fights against it.

“When- if-” Marlene bites her tongue. “If it’s needed, we can run away. I can take my mum, and my nice and nephew and we can just… disappear. If you need to.”

“I don’t run, love,” Sirius says, softly. “And neither do you.” Otherwise she’d have ran already, like so many others did when things escalated. Or she’d had stayed out of it, like a lot of purebloods do.

“I’m just saying, you’re not alone, alright?” Marlene shrugs, going for nonchalant and failing miserably.

It just scares Sirius more.

Go back to Gideon, he almost says. He wants to draw back and get her out of his house, put distance between them, fast. He *needs* to.

Because this can’t end well. This will end painfully and Sirius doesn’t want to get attached to any more people, doesn’t want to go through loss again.

Stop being a coward, a voice much like his father instructs him.

Sirius doesn’t throw her out.

(-)

Dumbledore doesn’t berate him *too* much.

No, Sirius would have been lucky to get that.

Instead, he gets the silence and the disappointment. The grave look in those usually cheery eyes.

It gives Sirius a sense of deja-vu.

The only thing that’s missing is Snape, yelling about injustices.

“You are a grown man, Sirius.” Dumbledore finally speaks. “You do not act like one, but if these are the choices you insist on making, there is hardly anything I can do to stop you. I will ask you, if at all possible, to dig deep inside yourself and try to think of others. Try to think of how worried James was; I know you do not care for yourself, but perhaps if you’d seen the stricken look on his face these past few days, you’d have reconsidered falling off the face of the earth.”

“Noted,” Sirius says, through gritted teeth.

Mercifully, Dumbledore leaves it at that.

“You are full of luck, it seems.”

Oh, yeah, I’m a regular four-leaf clover.

“Your negligence had somehow made Voldemort finally use you as a spy.”

Sirius can choose to be frustrated with Dumbledore, to cling to his irritation, or he can choose to let it go and focus on what is important. So he tries to do just that.

“Who was this McIntosh he spoke of? And the wand-”

“It is better if you do not know,” Dumbledore interrupts him.

Sirius shoves his hands in the pockets of his robe, so he won’t do something silly like going for his wand.

“And thank you for not lying that you accompanied him on that endeavour.”

“You can fuck right off!”

The fact that Dumbledore thanks Sirius for not lying in order to escape responsibility is outrageous.

It’s Sirius’ own fault. He should have listened to Voldemort and went with the story. But no, he decided to be honest; he decided it’s more important Dumbledore knows everything that happens on Tuesdays dates.

He slams the door so hard on his way out of the office, the gargoyles yell at him.

(-)

Sirius spends his morning being yelled at by James in Godric’s Hollow.

Remus and Peter are there, too. And Lily, of course.

“I haven’t slept in four days!” James pokes his finger in Sirius’ chest.

He looks terrible. Sirius can see he hadn’t slept in days.

Horrible guilt washes over him, in waves.

“None of us did! We searched for you everywhere!”

“I won’t disappear again,” Sirius promises.

For all of *Blacks don't apologise*, Sirius asks for James' forgiveness often. It's like making up for never saying 'sorry' to anyone else, by drowning James in the word, until he forgives Sirius.

Eventually James softens. It's always like that with him. He can never stay mad at Sirius long; except that one time with Snape and the shack, he always forgives Sirius in a matter of hours, for anything.

Remus is not as quick to forgive, and Sirius never apologises to him. He hadn't, back then, and he certainly doesn't do it now. Not when he looks at Sirius with suspicion.

"Even for you, this is… unusual," is the only thing Remus points out.

James gets a twitch in his jaw and he turns on Remus. "Stop that!" he hisses, and Sirius realises these two must have had some conversations, while Sirius was away. That Remus must have implied many times this is *unusual* for Sirius.

Peter is quiet. When there is a fight, when there is tension inside the group, Peter never wants to interfere. He's never been good in confrontations.

But he is on Sirius' side. He always is. He comes to Sirius after these small fights, and offers his support, in private.

And this time isn't any different.

When Sirius drags himself out of the house, Peter follows him, invites him over for a late breakfast.

"Lucky Dumbledore paired me with McKinnon, because you really needed a Healer, mate. I wouldn't have known what to do if I were alone. Looked like a car ran you over."

"Might have happened." Sirius shrugs.

"Wanna talk about it?" Peter asks, too casually. Isn't it funny that James had missed this must have been more than Sirius' usual weekend escapades, but Peter doesn't?

"I'm good."

"Alright."

Peter still lives with his mother, his living room filled with fluffy pillows and old china on display, run down pink carpets, moth-eaten frilly drapes.

Some of the boys in the Order make fun of him for not leaving the nest.

Well, they *made* fun of him, until Sirius wiped out his wand and gave them more reason to think him a dark wizard.

Peter's loyalty to his frail mother is not something others would understand.

It shames Sirius, because he couldn't bare taking care of his father. But Peter is there, doing it, day in, day out.

"I need girl advice, if you're in the mood. Teach me some of your smooth ways to pull birds. "

"Always in the mood for that," Sirius says, accepting a beer from Peter.

Mrs Pettigrew makes them breakfast, which is never good, forgetful as she is. There's always something wrong.

She either fails to salt the food altogether, or she forgets she already did and does it again, making it close to impossible to eat.

There's always something burnt.

But she enjoys it, likes having Sirius over. She fumbles around with her best silverware and makes a terrible mess in the house, which Sirius and Peter clean, when she retreats to rest after a meal.

She keeps forgetting Sirius' father died and always speaks of that one time when Orion Black helped her shrink her shopping bags in Diagon Ally, decades ago.

Sometimes she forgets her own husband died, and that is far, far worse.

(-)

The next Death Eater meeting Sirius is called to attend is once more held at Lestrange Manor.

Sirius is the last to arrive, and when he enters the room, he goes to where he sat last, no kneeling involved. Just a polite greeting directed at everyone in the room.

"Tell us about Dumbledore's inner circle," Voldemort asks.

He acts differently with the others there. More… Sirius isn't sure, more what exactly.

More formal, maybe. But that's not quite right.

In any case, he's different.

Dumbledore prepared Sirius for this question long before; the old man seemed surprised Voldemort hasn't asked sooner.

Sirius gives the names he's supposed to. Moody, McGonagall, the Prewett twins, Dorcas Medowes, the Longbottoms; none are a surprise for Voldemort.

Benjy Fenwick is a surprise.

Voldemort doesn't show it, but Rodolphus does, with a frown.

"How long has he been with Dumbledore?" Lucius intervenes when silence falls over the room.

"Not sure; he was there when I came in. Seemed comfortable with missions."

A look passes between Voldemort and Lucius. Very short. It raises the hairs on Sirius' neck. He wonders if he and Dumbledore just sentenced Benjy to death.

"Go on," Voldemort returns his gaze to Sirius.

"Emmeline Vance." Sirius feels terrible about outing her, since they've had sex a couple of times. But Dumbledore insisted Voldemort must know already. And apparently he does, because no one reacts.

"Edgar Bones." Dumbledore wasn't sure about Edgar, but to Sirius relief, Rodolphus snorts, clearly well acquainted with Edgar.

They still stare at him, all of them, and Sirius doesn't know what to do, because these were all the names Dumbledore considered safe to pass on.

"Go on," Voldemort says again.

"That's all," Sirius lies.

There's Arabella Fig and Mundungus, but Dumbledore said under no circumstance is Voldemort to find out about them. As a squib and a petty criminal, they are really easy to kill and not even the Ministry would care.

Elphias Dodge, very high up in the Ministry, who must remain a secret, at all costs. Dedalus Diggle, whom Sirius hates with a passion, but is also working in the Ministry and were Lucius to find he is close to Dumbledore, he'd have him fired before they can blink.

"I think you're forgetting some people," Voldemort speaks softly. Warningly. "Five of them, to be exact."

Sirius' blood pressure goes up, just like that.

"You want me to say names you already know?" he hisses.

"Yes."

Merlin, how he hates Voldemort. He forgets it, sometimes. Many times, actually. When they duel, when he shows Sirius ancient, lost magic.

When he seems human.

But he's not that. Or not just that.

Voldemort is the *worst.*

He wants to force the names out of Sirius just to make him feel terrible.

"Sirius," Bella whispers, urgently, when what seems like minutes pass and he keeps silent.

The fucking bitch. She's been hiding from Sirius the past week, but he'll get her soon.

"Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Marlene McKinnon, Lily and James Potter." Sirius spits their names out.

They were on Dumbledore's list, too. Everyone in Britain knows how loyal they are to Dumbledore.

Voldemort smiles, amused.

Sirius sees red.

"Didn't McKinnon almost kill you, Rodolphus, when you were trying to assassinate the witness in Wilkes trial? You all know her name."

They know of Peter, and Remus, and obviously the Potters. Voldemort just likes to make him feel like a traitor.

"Please," Rodolphus snorts. "She got lucky. You both got lucky."

When Sirius saw Marlene heading straight for Rodolphus, Sirius' heart sunk. She didn't know who she was attacking. It was Sirius' second battle, but he just had a feeling in his gut Lestrange was behind that decorated mask.

So he rushed to her side, and they were lucky indeed, the Aurors appearing around them seconds later. In the confusion, Marlene got a really nice hit in, taking Rodolphus in the neck. He barely managed to escape the Aurors.

Marlene and Sirius were arrested, but Moody and Frank let them go, all hush-hush. Everyone in the Auror Department knew about the Order of the Phoenix, anyway. They knew the Order was just trying to help.

"If the Aurors weren't there, they wouldn't even find enough pieces of her to bury," Rodolphus says, sneering at Sirius. "I'd have spared you, for Bella, but you'd be in a great deal of-"

"Sirius, sit down." Only when Voldemort barks the order, does Sirius realise he's standing, wand already in hand. "Rodolphus, don't antagonise him. You know he's quite attached to the girl."

Fuck.

Sirius sits, mostly because his knees feel weak when he realises that yes, apparently Death Eaters read gossips magazines. The Witch Weekly especially has a fixation with Sirius *'the disowned, devilishly handsome Black'* and likes to print photographs with him in various stages of inebriation. In some of them, he'd been kissing Marlene, outside of the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, or fighting with Gideon at the Leaky Cauldron, Marlene trying to get between them.

The articles were even worse, painting Marlene as an *'unremarkable looking woman with no values'* and pondering if she uses love potions because how else would she make a Prewett and a Black fight over her?

Sirius feels the need to say he is not attached to her at all, to dismiss it, but he realises that will just make it worse.

There are so many people that can be used against him. His best friends, Regulus, Marlene.

You'll just have to stop seeing her in public. That's all. Let them photograph you with other women.

Rabastan's stomach growls, loudly, breaking the tense silence in the room.

"Thank you, Sirius," Voldemort speaks and from Lucius' face it's clear Voldemort doesn't thank people often. "You'll tell Dumbledore you were finally allowed at a meeting. You will tell him it was held here, and that Rodolphus is a Death Eater."

"He'll be shocked, no doubt," Sirius spits out, trying to calm down.

"You will say Yaxley was here, too."

Sirius nods, sharply. Yaxley is no surprise, either.

"Good. I'll take my leave." Voldemort stands, and the others scramble to their feet as well.

Sirius remains seated.

"My Lord, we are about to have dinner. Would you like to join us?" Bellatrix asks him, looking up at him with starry eyes.

It makes Sirius sick.

Rabastan looks terrified at the idea, unconsciously shaking his head at her.

"I'm not hungry." Voldemort offers her a smile.

"We aren't either," Bellatrix insists, right as Rabastan's stomach growls again. "We'll just have some drinks. Would you like to join us for that?"

"If you are sure," Voldemort allows and Bellatrix' smile could light up the room.

"It would be an honour," Rodolphus says.

“Enjoy!” Sirius stands, making his way to the door.

“I am sure Bellatrix would like you to partake.” Voldemort blocks the door just as Sirius reaches it.

Oh, no. No. Sirius is not having drinks with the dark lord and his lackeys.

“Of course! Stay, cousin.”

“I really don’t-”

“It wasn’t a question,” Lucius whispers in his ear, as Voldemort goes through the doors, Bella right behind him. “If he asked you to stay, you stay.”

“Maybe that works if you’re a spineless coward, but-”

“Stay.” Rodolphus comes at his side. “You don’t want to make him angry. Just stay and have a fucking drink. It’s not like it’s a chore for you.”

“Merlin, I’m famished,” Rabastan complains.

“You’ll survive.” Rodolphus pats his brother on the back and leaves the room.

(-)

Lucius isn’t sure if he’s supposed to stay or leave; he plays it safe and comes along to one of the living rooms.

He, Sirius and Rabastan are clearly all uncomfortable, as they sit beside each other on one of the couches.

Bella looks like she’s in some heaven, attention solely on Voldemort, who sits in one of the ghastly armchairs, that looks to be decorated with skulls on the high legs.

Knowing Rodolphus, those might be real human skulls.

A terrified house-elf shows up when Bella snaps her fingers.

“We’ll have some drinks for now,” she orders.

The poor thing only looks at Sirius, though, expectantly.

“Firewhiskey. Lots of it,” Sirius says.

“And peanuts,” Rodolphus adds.

The house-elf leaves, just like that, and Sirius understands she already knows what Voldemort usually drinks, that he is often in Lestrange Manor, along with Lucius.

Voldemort had wine with Sirius, at their very first meeting. Now, like a boring old fart, he's served tea.

Bella snatches the separate tray that comes for Voldemort, before the elf can place it on the small table by the armchair.

She puts only a dash of milk inside, and stirs it gently, before offering the cup to Voldemort.

"Merlin," Sirius whispers, disgusted at this show of servitude, low enough that only Rabastan hears him

Only Bella talks, a mile a minute. Voldemort says a word or two from time to time. Rodolphus is unbothered.

Lucius tries to look calm and unaffected, but as soon as his drink is finished, he stands and excuses himself, muttering some lies about an 'urgent appointment' he has.

Sirius moves to stand, downing his glass, but both Voldemort and Bellatrix turn to stare at him.

Am I kidnapped? Why was Lucius allowed to leave?

He drinks more, even though his brain tries to warn him not to get drunk with enemies on all sides.

Some time passes and Sirius zones out, planning his escape, when Rabastan's sharp elbow kicks him in the ribs.

"What?" Sirius demands of him, but Rabastan just jerks his head at Voldemort.

"I asked for your opinion about the Carrows," Voldemort says.

"They're all cunts," Sirius says, his filter brought down by the whiskey.

Not that he has much of a filter when he's sober.

"They truly are," Rodolphus says, surprising Sirius.

"Alecto is not so bad," Bella says. "One of the few women that aren't brainwashed like the rest. She says she'd like to fight."

Rodolphus laughs. "Hilarious."

"Why is it hilarious?" Bella turns on him, eyes narrowed. "Because she's a woman?"

"Because she's dumb as a rock," Sirius pipes in, to stop Bella from going on one of her long and winded tirades about women and their many plights.

“She is a bit… odd. She could improve,” Bella says, calming down a little.

“Sure she can,” Sirius says, sarcastic.

“What about her brother?” Voldemort asks Rabastan, who is closest in age with Amycus.

Rabastan chokes on a peanut in his hurry to answer. “If we need more expendable men, he’d do just fine.”

Voldemort looks at Rodolphus, who simply shakes his head.

Dumbledore is wrong. He always says Voldemort listens to no one, dismisses any opinions from those around him.

Sirius can see that he doesn’t dismiss Rodolphus.

Eventually Voldemort finishes his tea- which must have gone cold in the past *hour*- and leaves.

(-)

Bella walks away quickly as soon as Voldemort is out of the door.

Rabastan instantly starts moaning to Rodolphus that’s he’s starving to death.

Sirius slips after Bella.

He knows her so well, he accurately predicts where she is going. He takes a shortcut, through hallways that he is very familiar with no matter how much time had passed since he walked them, waits for a few seconds, hidden behind a monstrous statue of a wizard stepping on a house-elf neck and when she walks past, he grabs her by the hair.

She yelps, rounding on him.

“I would have told you!” she says, placating, before Sirius can open his mouth.

She doesn’t struggle in his grasp, lets him slam her against the stone wall.

They almost knock over a portrait- it shouts at them.

“When?” Sirius hisses, getting in her face. “When Reg would be caught by Aurors, dragged to Azkaban or killed -”

She rolls her eyes, and he wants to hit her.

“You know I would have taken care of him. Rodolphus and Lucius would have-”

“How could you let him take the Mark? How could you encourage him?” He shakes her by the shoulders, furious with her. “How could you keep it from me?”

She braces a hand against his chest. “The Dark Lord ordered me not to-”

“Is that your excuse? Taking orders from a half-blood-”

She slaps him so hard, his head almost spins.

“Don’t you dare!” she spits, pushing him away, eyes glowing. “Don’t you dare say that -”

“If he’d have a name, I’d call him by it,” Sirius draws his wand when she goes for hers.

She’s past irritated, straight into furious.

Good. The stupid wench, placing his brother in danger-

“He has a name.” Her voice reaches the same level Sirius’ mother used to. “Don’t make me wipe the floor with you!”

“Does he? You never seem to call him Voldemort. Too afraid, huh? Bella Black, fearless witch… cowering before a *man*.”

He ducks just in time. A bright orange spell hits the wall behind him, scorching it.

He was never good at fighting from a defensive position- not good enough for someone like her, at least.

Eventually, one of her curses gets through all of his defences and takes him in the right shoulder.

“Fuck!” He can’t stop the moan of pain coming from his mouth. If it were anyone else responsible for it, he would have withheld it; but he can be vulnerable around her, he always could.

“You stupid idiot!” She comes to him, breathing hard. “Don’t move.”

“I *can’t* move,” he complains, leaning on what is left of another hideous statue. “Where did your husband get all this ‘art’? Merlin, it’s appalling.”

“Beats the decapitated house-elves adorning the walls in Grimmauld, any day,” she spits back, her hands gently prodding around his wound. “Why do you have to provoke me so?”

“You’re beautiful when you go crazy.”

She sighs, tracing her wand over the injury, murmuring a counter curse.

Sirius moans again, sharp needles spreading through his arm. “The fuck was that? Teach me.”

She ignores him, focused.

She calms down as she works. The pain recedes slowly, but she's not as efficient as Voldemort in taking away the pain caused by his own curses. She's not as good as Marlene at healing, either.

Bella, like Sirius, was never interested in learning how to mitigate the destruction they can cause.

"I am not afraid of him," she whispers, eventually. "I respect him. He's the only influential man I know that never looked down on me because I am a woman."

Sirius imagined that is how Voldemort enchanted her; how he must have guessed Bella's ire and scorn at the way she was treated all her life.

"He doesn't lust after me, like the dogs around me. I could be walking naked at his side and he would still only meet my eyes, nothing else."

"He's mad, in that case." Sirius says, after a short break.

But it eases some of the jealousy he'd felt, watching Voldemort and Bella together. It eases some of his concerns.

"You're not fucking him, then?" he asks, just to be sure.

She gives him a sharp look. "You aren't so jealous of Rodolphus. And you must know what happens between married couples," she says, mockingly.

"You don't love Rodolphus."

This makes her laugh, incredulity erasing any lingering anger. "I do."

Sirius stands straighter, pain mostly gone. He waves it off. "Not as much as you love me."

Voldemort though… she looks at Voldemort the same way she looks at Sirius. Not that she'd ever looked at Sirius with reverence, but she used to look at him like he was her salvation, like he was the only one that mattered. And now she's staring at Voldemort like that.

"You silly boy." She stands on her toes and kisses him lightly. "You know you're my soulmate. Even if you abandoned me, you can never truly turn your back on me. You'll always come back to where you belong. By my side."

"I would appreciate it if you keep this *cousinly* affection out of my house, at the very least," Rodolphus' voice echoes in the hallway.

Bella giggles, stepping away from Sirius. "Look what he's done to your statues, Rod."

Marble heads are on the floor, pieces of metal swards strewn across the hallway. All her doing, of course.

"And I so loved them, husband." She smiles, like a shark. "What a pity."

Rodolphus looks between them, bored. “Dinner is ready. I’m going to instruct the elves to poison his food.” He nods at Sirius. “By the time I’m done with that, I expect you in the dining room.”

“Well, that settles it,” Sirius says in the silence that falls after Rodolphus’ departure. “I’m off.”

“You need some food in you, especially after all that alcohol. You’re staying.”

“Bella-”

“We are your family. Families eat together.” She grabs his elbow and drags him after her. “Family protects each other. I would have protected Regulus, like I am protecting you. Do you think the dark lord suffers your impudence on account of your pretty face? He does it because I asked him.”

“He does it so I forget who he is.”

Bella bites her lip. “I know you’re torn; I do. No matter how much you love me, you love Potter, too. I know you’re loyal and you have a soft spot for the mudbloods.” She stops walking to look at him. “But Sirius, the dark lord would still wage this war, even if you weren’t on his side. Think about that.”

“He had me kill Parkinson. He was a pureblood. A member of the Sacred Twenty Eight. And if I hadn’t done it, he would have used Regulus-”

He might as well be speaking with one of the statues for all the attention she’s giving him. It’s like she can’t hear him, trapped in her devotion for Voldemort.

“He will win. *We* will win. And because we are on his side, when we take over Britain, we can ask for favours.” She pats his arm, comforting. “Think about that when your stupid little conscience troubles you. Think that you can ask for Potter’s life, once the war is done.”

She smiles up at him.

“You can save your blood traitor friends. If you help the dark lord, if you become dear to him, he’ll grant you their lives. Like he spared Andromeda for me. I made sure she will never be hurt, no matter if her marriage is against all we stand for. I will never speak to her again, but I made sure she will live her treacherous life in peace. You can do the same for others.”

“Only as long as we fuck over all the muggleborns-” Sirius tries, but he knows it is a fruitless effort.

“Mudbloods,” she corrects him. “They don’t matter. Why should we care about them? We only care about family. It is the safest way.”

(-)

He gets a letter from the Wizengamot, just as they are finishing an Order meeting.

Everyone recognises the official Ministry seal.

It's a thick envelope.

"That's not good," Gideon says. "No?" He asks Dumbledore as Sirius takes the letter off the owl's leg.

Gideon's father has a seat on the inherited side of the Wizengamot.

Gideon should know more than Dumbledore, who is on the elected side of that ancient institution.

But, of course, Dumbledore knows everything. "No, it isn't good."

Sirius opens the letter. "They want a meeting," Sirius informs them, skimming over the words.

"Your brother must have disputed your claim."

Sirius's jaws clench together so hard, it's a wonder his teeth don't crack.

"He must have," Gideon agrees with Dumbledore. "It was expected he wouldn't just let you have it. But they can't stop you. I'll ask father- but you're the firstborn. No way they can push you aside."

Gideon looks at him, waiting for an answer.

He hates Sirius, but order business is order business.

The greater good takes precedence.

Sirius is not as mature. When he hates someone, he hates them. He can work side by side with them, but he won't be cordial, even when necessary.

"No, *Fabian*. They can't."

Gideon hates to be confused with his twin. They don't even look identical. It's rather easy to tell them apart, if you get to know them, even a bit.

Two seats to the left, Fabian rolls his eyes.

James snickers, beside Sirius, but quickly tries to pass it off as a cough.

"I'll learn why," Dumbledore starts to say.

"*I* will learn why," Sirius speaks over him. "After all, they want to see me tomorrow."

The Order was thrilled Sirius claimed his seat. They think Sirius will add his vote to the few in the Sacred Twenty Eight, like Gideon's father, that are voting with Dumbledore and the elected side.

Dumbledore knows better than that. Sirius informed him he will just block it. He is still happy, though, since a blocked vote is still a vote that won't go in Voldemort's favour.

"And what will you say when he orders you to use it?" Dumbledore paces through his office at Hogwarts.

"He can't order me to use it, just as you can't. If I support either of you publicly, the other won't trust me anymore. The perks of being a double spy."

Sirius has the perfect excuse to never use his vote. Neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort can pester him about it. Not for the foreseeable future, at least.

But what will the rest of the Order think, when Sirius refuses to vote with the' 'right' side?

First, you have to actually claim the seat.

Sirius looks around the long table. He sees precious few friendly faces. He's endeared himself to no one.

There's James, Peter and Lily, always on his side.

There's Marlene, watching him with concern.

There's Remus; whatever suspicions he has, he keeps them in private. In public, he always sticks by Sirius.

The rest of the Order, the older members, ones that don't know him so well, do not like him, not one bit.

Except McGonagall. She spent seven years yelling at Sirius, sending him to detention every chance she got. So he was greatly shocked to discover how fond she is of him, how protective when someone vaguely implies Sirius is not to be trusted.

"I trust him with my life," Sirius once overheard her hissing at Dorcas, a day after Sirius was arrested for a brawl he had in Knockturn Ally.

McGonagall didn't even want the Marauders and Lily in the Order, Sirius knows. But not because she doesn't trust them.

"They're so young, Albus," she told Dumbledore, in the very first Order meeting they attended.

(-)

He’s lead to the Wizengamot meeting room, deep inside the Ministry.

Only members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight are there, since it only concerns them.

Lucius and Rodolphus look at him from their elevated seats.

Several seats are empty.

The Black one, of course. But a few others as well.

Sirius’ eyes are drawn to the Gaunt one, on the back row of ancient throne-like chairs. It looks dusty.

A pity Alphard is dead; Sirius is certain that he could have found out Voldemort’s real name from him, if he tried hard enough.

Abraxas Malfoy surely knows it, since he was in the same year at Hogwarts with his mother. Obviously, his mother. Cygnus. But it’s not like they’ll tell Sirius. It’s not like they’ll even greet Sirius if they see him passing by.

Fudge, the useless waste of oxygen, at least according to Sirius’ father, starts speaking.

“We have a bit of an issue, Mr Black.”

Sirius sneers at him, with all the Black arrogance he can muster.

And he can muster quite a lot.

“What issue, Fudge?” Rodolphus barks at him and Fudge almost jumps out of his seat.

No one wants to be on the wrong side of Rodolphus’ infamous bad temper.

“Well, see-“

“See what? It’s his seat. Look at the fucker. Sirius Black, eldest son of house Black. Where is the problem?”

“I can speak for myself, Lestrange,” Sirius reminds him.

“Then speak. I haven’t had my coffee yet, and I’d rather not be stuck here for another hour until Fudge fumbles his way through five sentences.”

Many snickers. It is clear Fudge doesn’t enjoy much respect in this place.

But Crouch does. “I will take it from here, Cornelius.”

Crouch is set to replace the current Minister, who is failing terribly at containing Voldemort and his spreading influence.

Bartemius Crouch is a capable man. Or, at least, Sirius' father always said so.

Firmly against Voldemort. But not completely betraying the old ways, the way Ignatius Prewett does, aligning himself with Dumbledore and muggleborns.

"You are the eldest son, but you are disowned."

Sirius gives him a *look.*

"My mother burning a name in a tapestry means nothing, Crouch. My father-"

"Your father's Last Will and Testament remains unopened. His wishes matter more than anything else. But we do not know of his wishes, because you refused to give your consent for the will to be read. It sits at Gringotts, in your vault."

And his father left instructions that the letter can only be opened in Sirius', Regulus' and their grandfather's presence.

Suffice to say, Sirius never went.

He feels there is still a piece left of his father, in that letter at Gringotts. Something Orion Black has to say that hasn't been said yet. His voice, in an envelope. Once that is opened, Sirius will never hear it again.

After that, his father will be truly gone, forever.

"I live on in you," his father says, in his last hour of consciousness.

Sirius knows his father left him everything. He just knows it.

His relatives know it too, hence why no one even tried to insist he allows the will to be read, afraid Sirius will take all the gold and all their properties once that happens.

"In the absence of his written wishes, we have a disowned elder son, and we have the youngest, that wears the Black ring and lives in your ancestral house. So, you can see our dilemma."

Silence. Everyone is watching Sirius. Some with glee at this humiliation, others with curiosity.

Lucius has his poker face on, as Lily calls it. Sirius understood the expression better after she taught him how to play poker.

Rodolphus, however, looks pissed off.

Just goes to show, Sirius thinks. It would benefit Rodolphus and Voldemort to have Regulus get the seat. He would certainly vote the way Lucius tells him to.

But Rodolphus places bloodline traditions and old practices before anything else.

“It’s his seat. He is the firstborn,” he growls at Crouch.

“To avoid lengthy legal battles in the future, we need the will. But since I have a suspicion that will not happen-“

Fuck you, Sirius thinks, hating Crouch and the patronising way he’s speaking.

“I invited the other possible candidate to assure us he will not fight you over your seat.”

“Regulus is at Hogwarts,” Sirius says. Something in him relaxes when he realises it wasn’t his brother that contested his claim, but rather Crouch, concerned over legalities.

“Mr Black,” Fudge laughs, and Sirius wants to strangle him. “This is an important matter. We will write to Headmaster Dumbledore, and he will, of course, allow Regulus to come settle this, once we establish a date that won’t interfere with the boy’s studies.

Sirius does not want to see Regulus. But there’s nothing he can do about it.

(-)

He’s sitting on an uncomfortable bench in the corridor outside the Wizengamot meeting room, at an ungodly hour, far too early in the morning.

He’s been waiting for at least ten minutes, and there are few things in life Sirius hates more than being made to wait.

Regulus shows up, a lonely tall figure in the dimly lit corridor.

He doesn’t seem willing to get in Sirius’ punching range, so he goes to the opposite wall and leans against it.

Sirius does his best to ignore him.

But Regulus has too much of their mother inside him. He can’t leave well enough alone, he has to disturb the silence.

“Why do you want it?” he asks.

To protect you, you idiot. To stop Voldemort from using you, in any way.

“Because it is mine,” Sirius answers, looking at his dragon hide boots.

“Will you sit on that chair on which our father sat and vote with Dumbledore? Against everything our father ever stood for?”

“No,” Sirius spits, trying to keep his temper in check.

Regulus must be surprised at the admission.

“So…” he falters. “So Dumbledore didn’t put you up to-“

“When in our lives have I ever done something because an old man asked me to?” Sirius snarls at the boots.

“Then you’ll vote with us?”

“*Us*?”

“I mean Lucius and Rod and the rest,” Regulus hurries to correct himself.

Us, indeed.

“No.” Sirius looks up. It’s always like peering into some charmed mirror that might show Sirius a slightly different version of himself. “We both know what lying megalomaniac, psychotic monster Lucius and Rodolphus support.”

Regulus’ face closes off.

Our father would rather burn Grimmauld to the ground than support a half-blood.

But, of course, he won’t say that.

He won’t pit Regulus against Voldemort. Regulus was too young, too obedient to listen at closed doors, back when Voldemort started gathering power, rising through the ranks of their society.

Regulus doesn’t remember his mother calling Voldemort a mudblood.

And it is best left that way. If his little blood purist brother ever finds out he let himself be fooled by a half-blood, he wouldn’t react well at all.

“It is not wise to speak of such things in public,” Regulus says, voice full of warning.

“I’m not wise,” Sirius shrugs.

Regulus is tense, looking left and right, probably terrified someone might have heard Sirius and would report him to Voldemort, who would then want to kill Sirius for the disrespect.

Everyone is a little paranoid after Parkinson’s death.

For those with their eyes open, it was a very clear message. *Badmouth the dark lord, and you will have a heart attack, too.*

“Then you will effectively block our vote,” Regulus says, once assured no one heard them.

“*My* vote. That’s right. I’ll block it.”

“Why? Why would you-“

“Because it’s mine. Period. Father wanted me to have it.”

“That’s rich!” Regulus makes a derisive sound. “Father wanted you to stay home, I am sure. He would have wanted you to have the seat so you can fight for what he fought. So you would take care of us, and our traditions. If he would have known what choices you ended up making, I assure you, he’d have disowned you himself. “

Sirius gets up, walks until he’s crowding Regulus against the wall.

“If you put up a fight, I’ll drag us to Gringotts, I’ll request grandad join us and I will open that damn will. And once we hear what we both know is there, I swear to Merlin, I’ll banish mother to one of our houses in Yugoslavia-“

“We don’t have a house in Yugoslavia-“

“Then I’ll raise her a tent there!” Sirius cuts over him. “I’ll send her beloved Kreacher with her, and order him to feed her a bowl of rice a day.”

A muscle jumps on Regulus’ forehead.

“And what will you do with me?”

Sirius opens his mouth but closes it.

I’ll lock you in your room and keep you safe.

“If you wanted to do that, Sirius, you would have done it. You could have entered our vault any time you wanted. Mother expected you to. But you never did. You never took a single galleon.”

“I don’t want this to get ugly, Regulus. Don’t fight me on this, or it will.”

Regulus sneers at him. “I believe you. For all you hate mother, you are just like her. You are ruled by spite.”

“We are ready for you,” Fudge suddenly opens the door, right before Sirius can disembowel Regulus.

(-)

Regulus assures the Wizengamot that he doesn’t want the seat, that it is natural it goes to Sirius.

He doesn’t look at Sirius again, and Sirius doesn’t spare him a glance, either.

They wait in silence for Crouch to find some documents that would make it official Regulus renounces all his rights in the Wizengamot.

Regulus signs them swiftly and then he insists he needs to go back to Hogwarts before classes start.

“Claim your seat, Mr Black.”

A knot suddenly forms in Sirius’ throat, some wild emotion twisting his heart as he climbs the stairs.

When he reaches the magical chair, with the Black crest proudly engraved in the backrest, Sirius cuts his hand, and watches the blood drip onto the armrest.

The chair glows brightly before it returns to normal.

“Welcome to the Wizengamot,” Lucius says from the next chair.

(-)

He’s waiting for an elevator amongst a number of politicians, heart still twisting painfully inside him.

Sirius ignores the others, staring at his bleeding hand, watches his old, *precious, pure* blood dripping on the floor.

“-and we all know that man must be stopped. He’s ruining Hogwarts,” Bulstrode says.

“Dumbledore,” Burke spits. “He still has that *abomination* on the grounds, as Ground Keeper?”

“The giant is still there-”

“Is he really a giant? I can’t believe it-”

“Of course he is,” Lucius drawls. “Now, if we can only prove it. You should hear father talk about it. He was a student when Hagrid was a first year and the stories father has to-”

Sirius’ head snaps up. *Hagrid!*

Hagrid went to school with his mother. With Voldemort.

How did Sirius not think of it sooner?

Hagrid, who is easier to trick than a child.

(-)

“What a surprise!” Sirius says, when *accidentally* knocking into Hagrid at The Leaky Cauldron.

As if he wasn’t the one to convince the menagerie in Knockturn that deals with illegal creatures, owl Hagrid about a possible dragon egg coming into their possession.

The egg was fake; Sirius wants to learn Voldemort’s name, but he doesn’t want Hogwarts to burn, which would happen if someone gave Hagrid a dragon.

“What brings you to London, mate?”

Hagrid mumbles something about ‘Hogwarts official business’. His whole face burns red, or at least what is visible around his beard.

He’s a dreadful liar. *This should be easy.*

“Let me treat you to some firewhiskey. You look like you need one.”

He would, disappointed the dragon wasn’t real.

Getting Hagrid drunk is expensive business. Sirius usually drinks along, so he’d never realised how tedious it is to wait for the giant to get drunk.

Sirius drinks only a little this time, keeping his wits about him.

He steers the conversation to wands, to school, to teachers, to anything he can think of to trigger Hagrid into talking about his school days.

But it’s hard. Hagrid is sensitive about the topic.

Sirius gets some more whiskey in him, before he tries again.

“Oh, my! I totally forgot! Binns was alive when you went to school, no?” Sirius asks, apropos of nothing.

Luckily for him, Hagrid is oblivious to manipulation. He’d fall for it even sober.

“He was,” Hagrid admits.

“Fascinating,” Sirius says. “Say, did you meet my mum? I think she must have been there around the time you were.”

“Met her,” Hagrid snorts with such force a few napkins fly off the table. “Not like she’d pay me any notice. With her nose in the air, arrogant like any Black-”

Why don’t you tell me what you think of us, will you? Sirius almost barks at him, but he keeps his irritation at bay. Now is not the time.

“That brother of hers- a prick- what was his name-”

“Cygnus?”

“No, that doesn’t sound right.”

“Alphard,” Sirius hisses. Uncle Alphard was no prick. Hagrid is drinking Alphard’s galleons right that second.

“That one. Mocking me, laughing at my size. They were all terrible, snotty kids. Awful.”

“Slytherins, what can you do?” Sirius nods him along. “And there was Abraxas Malfoy there too, no?”

“The worst of the lot. Fucking Malfoys. Can’t stand them.”

“No one can.”

How to ask? Was there a creepy Prefect? Creepier than usual? A Head Boy? A muggleborn in Slytherin? Or maybe that was just his mum exaggerating, calling him a mudblood. Maybe he was known as a half-blood-

“No. No. Malfoy wasn’t the worst.” Hagrid corrects himself darkly.

“Oh?”

“There was this Prefect-”

Bingo! Sirius just knows this is Voldemort. Who else can be worse than a bunch of Blacks and a Malfoy?

“I thought he was fine, you know? We all did. He was civil. A muggleborn in Slytherin-”

Yes! Yes!

“He caught me on his patrol, after curfew. Back when I kept Aragog in the castle-”

Sirius shudders, momentarily distracted. He’d managed to wipe out Aragog from his memory.

He’d met the *sweet, gentle soul*, as Hagrid calls him, on one of his trips as Padfoot.

His sons almost ate them. They barely got away, James swinging his antlers around, Sirius biting and growling; Moony did the most damage, to be sure.

But it was Peter that saved them. Peter that recognised the huge talking spider at their centre was an Acromantula, and transformed back to human form, conjuring snakes with his wand, spooking them away.

The next morning, Sirius asked Hagrid what on Earth was an Acrumantula doing in their forest and Hagrid made them swear not to tell Dumbledore and covered for them on many

occasions as payment.

“He caught me with Aragog, but he didn’t tell on me. He helped me make a more secure trunk for him, down in the dungeons. Told me it is only temporary and I’ll have to release him in the Forest once he grows into his venom.”

Hagrid’s mouth twists, the traces of the famed giant savagery shining in his eyes as the glass breaks in his grip.

“I thought him a friend. But then that whole mess with the Chamber of Secrets happened-”

Sirius heard a little about it. Rumours that it had been opened had circulated the school when Sirius was young.

“A hoax,” Binns assured them. “No heir of Slytherin has walked these halls since Corvinus Gaunt, back in the early 1800. It was just a prank gone wrong.”

“And they were trying to close the school, because they couldn’t find the culprit and a girl died. *He* convinced them it was Aragog that killed her! Aragog wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

Right.

“Besides, Aragog didn’t even have his venom yet. How could he have killed anyone? The bastard. But Dippet believed *him* and he expelled me. They’d have dragged me to Azkaban if it weren’t for Professor Dumbledore. Great man, Dumbledore. Great man.”

“The greatest, sure. Listen, what was his name. That Slytherin-”

“Tom,” Hagrid spits out.

Tom, really? Sirius laughs, exhilarated. And amused, because… Tom, really.

“Tom who?”

“Tom Riddle.”

Got you.

Chapter End Notes

I know I am very late with this update. I have an excuse- I had to finish one of my other fics, and that was very difficult. But now it's done, so we'll go back on schedule.

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 8

“For Merlin’s sake,” Moody grunts when Dawlish escorts Sirius into the Auror’s Headquarters.

“Top of the morning to you!” Sirius grins.

Some of the Aurors laugh. He caught them between shifts. The night crew is tired, sitting at their offices, waiting for their replacements to finish getting ready.

“‘lo, Black. Been some months since I’ve seen your mug ‘round here,” Indira says.

“A record,” Scrimgeour mutters, without looking from the stack of papers he’s signing.

“Missed me, love?” Sirius asks Indira.

She rolls her eyes.

Frank looks pissed off when he sees Sirius, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“Why isn’t he in handcuffs?” Savage demands, coming closer and poking Dawlish in the chest.

“It’s… Sirius.” Dawlish shrugs. “He never causes trouble when we pick him up.”

“Of course not. I don’t want to hurt any of you,” Sirius slurs with a cheeky grin.

He smells strongly of firewhiskey. Because he’d poured it all over his robes. But he did not swallow a single drop.

“At least I hope you took his wand. Black or not, you can’t have a detainee armed in our-”

Dawlish pulls out Sirius’ wand from his pocket, but before Savage can get his hands on it, Frank intercepts him, ripping it out of Dawlish grasp.

“I’ll check it.”

He usually does. Frank, Moody or Alice always make sure they get Sirius’ wand, just in case he did something stupid with it, something that can land him in real trouble.

And there comes Moody. “What did you do this time?”

“Just having some fun. No one told me you outlawed fun!”

“He started a fight over the pretty- I mean, over the lass that tends the bar at the Lucky Unicorn,” Dawlish answers. “He destroyed some property and wouldn’t calm down, so

someone called it in."

Peter called it in. But they made sure no one would know that little detail.

"But why do you want to get arrested?" Peter asks, eyes narrowed.

"I want another chance with Indira, and she won't answer my letters. Only way to talk to her is to show up there. Don't tell James or Remus I did this on purpose; they'll think I'm an idiot."

"You are an idiot." Peter sighs, but he agrees to it.

"Go on Dawlish, you were out all night. Go, rest. I'll take him."

"Thanks, boss!"

Moody mumbles an acknowledgment and pulls Sirius by the arm, takes him through a corridor.

Sirius has been arrested plenty of times- caught driving a flying, modified muggle vehicle without authorisation, assaulting a barkeeper in Knockturn, smashing through a window in Hogsmeade while drunk and so forth.

'Youthful indiscretions' Moody called them, before quickly releasing Sirius.

He's been taken into custody, brought to the Ministry and held for a few hours for so many times, he knows half of the Aurors by name.

Everyone knows Moody would excuse *no one* for 'youthful indiscretions.'

The Order of the Phoenix is just as illegal as the Death Eaters, but far more accepted, since they aren't terrorists; secret as it is supposed to be, everyone somehow knows esteemed Dumbledore is at its head and their only goal is to fight Voldemort.

The smart Aurors connected the dots; the only thing Sirius and Moody would have in common is their loyalty to Dumbledore.

"Can I get one of the offices, please?" Sirius asks, making sure to lean heavily on Moody. "I could really use some sleep until you finish that blasted paperwork. If you put me in a holding cell and a cellmate wakes me up, I'm afraid I'll just cause more trouble. And then you'll have more paperwork to do."

"You're a pice of work, Black," Moody barks at him. "Fucking irresponsible kid, you have no business in a war-"

He cuts himself off as they pass by a couple of Aurors.

"Hello, Sirius! Nice boots!" Ana winks at him and he winks back.

Moody grunts, and he shoves Sirius in the Archive room, as he did on multiple occasions.

The room is large, filled with enormous cabinets, a couple of desks, some armchairs and a couch on which Sirius slept on in the past.

“You can take the couch. If you throw up, you’re cleaning it. Without magic.”

“I love you, Alastor! You’re so good to me!” Sirius tries to hug him, but he’s shoved in the chest, hard.

He falls on his arse. Moody leaves, slamming the door behind him.

Perfect.

Sirius jumps to his feet and quickly locates the cabinet labelled “R”.

They really should throw some of this stuff out, Sirius thinks, when he goes through files, rapidly.

Some are from the *eighteen* century.

It takes at least half an hour before he locates it.

“Finally!” he whispers, victorious when he pulls the file out.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE.

Marvolo. Like his grandfather.

A part of Sirius is surprised he has a record at all; from his understanding, the little snippets gathered from Voldemort and Hagrid, Voldemort had been an exemplary student, Head Boy and all, before he disappeared.

But he had to check. He wants to know everything he can about Tom Riddle.

It’s a very thin file. Nothing like Sirius’, who is already thick enough to be used as a weapon, as Alice likes to say.

He opens it and-

Fuck me. No fucking way.

There’s a picture with a boy in a Slytherin uniform; the standard type of photograph all students take before their N.E.W.Ts.

Sirius had to retake his four times, because he kept making silly faces, and McGonagall didn’t appreciate it.

Voldemort is so still in the picture it’s almost as if it’s a muggle one. The only sign of movement is a blink, now and then, and what must be draft moving his robe around his feet.

But the most shocking thing is not how stiffly he stands. No.

Voldemort used to be *hot as fuck.*

Sirius stares at the photograph in shock.

Not important, his mind screams at him. *Focus!*

Right, right. Sirius tears his eyes away from it, to read the red ink to the side.

'Wanted for questioning in relation to Hepzibah Smith's missing artefacts.'

Smith. That's an old family. Ancient, really.

He reads, heart beating a mile per minute.

Apparently he'd started as a suspect in the woman's murder, but a house-elf confessed to accidentally poisoning her mistress.

Bollocks. No way anyone believed that rubbish.

But Sirius reads the name of the Auror on the case and- it is a name he doesn't know. A muggleborn name.

He sighs. Only a muggle-born…

A pureblood wizard that was raised around elves would know that is impossible. No matter how old, how decrepit an elf gets, their magical vows impede them from even accidentally causing direct physical harm to the family they serve. And this elf wasn't even old, Sirius discovers as he turns the page. Only a little over three hundred years.

Kreacher is pushing *seven* hundred.

Murder 'solved', another issue presented itself. *'Incredibly valuable artefacts'* had been found missing by the family and reported to the authorities.

Salazar's Slytherin locket and Helga Hufflepuff's cup.

And Tom Riddle is written down as Smith's last known contact.

'Frequent visitor.'

Apparently she wrote in her journal she'd showed him her treasures in an effort to seduce him.

No wonder she tried to seduce him, Sirius thinks, eyes flickering back to the picture.

Date of birth: 1926 (?)

Parentage: unknown.

Blood status: presumed muggleborn.

Place of residence: unknown

Place of employment: Borgin and Burke's.

Sirius bursts out laughing. Hot Voldemort worked at Borgin and Burke's!

Stop it. Merlin.

Sirius shakes his head, folds the file in half and hides it in his leather jacket.

He looks at the clock on the wall. Moody wouldn't have had time to finish Sirius' papers. *Since I am here, might as well.*

He heads to the "G" cabinet.

Sweet Merlin, you had no chance, you poor bastard, Sirius thinks when he's faced with dozens of Gaunts. Murder is in their bloodline.

Some killed their children. Some killed their siblings. And this only in the past two centuries.

Finally, he reaches Marvolo Gaunt, because of course he has a file, too.

Three stints in Azkaban. Eight months imprisonment for stabbing a man's hand after a game of cards; eleven months for marrying his fourteen-year-old cousin.

The last one- six months for assaulting five Aurors when they attempted to arrest his son, Morfin.

Alright, next, Sirius thinks, and he pulls out Mprfin Gaunt.

Three years in Azkaban for resisting arrest and casting a Boil Curse at a muggle.

And, Sirus reads, heart in his throat, a life sentence for murdering the same muggle, and his parents eighteen years after the first offence.

He is reported to have no children, but Sirius already knows now he couldn't be Voldemort's father.

Because the muggles he killed…

'Riddle family.'

A pity no one revisits these old files, otherwise even the most braindead Aurors might think the Riddle they wanted for questioning might be related to the Riddles Morfin Gaunt killed.

There is no file for Merope Gaunt.

(-)

Sirius gets out of bed, quietly, without disturbing Marlene.

He finds his leather jacket discarded on the floor and climbs on the roof of his house.

He uses his wand to shine light over the file he stole.

He's fascinated by the picture. The more he looks at it, the more he can recognise Voldemort in it.

His cheekbones are sharper now than they used to be in the photograph, almost cutting through his far paler skin.

But they are the same cheekbones, with that promise of elegance and aristocracy.

Sirius saw Morphin's and Marvolo Gaunt's pictures, too, and Voldemort does not take after them at all.

He must take after his father.

His father, murdered by his uncle. *What happened there?*

Where is your mother? Where are you hiding her?

Sirius is so very curious, what sort of terrifying creature could spawn and raise Voldemort.

The eyes in the picture are a dark, *warm* brown. The colour is unrecognisable in the current Voldemort, with all the red mixed in it. Yet they hold the same intelligence, the same mesmerising power.

His lips are the same, only now they have a scar very close to the upper left lip.

His jaw is not as defined as it was in the picture. Voldemort's nose is thinner now than his past self had it.

The hair is still dark, the same colour, only the boy in the picture has it short, styled to the side, a slight curl to it.

Voldemort wears it longer these days- how long, impossible to know, since it's always tied back. It lost the shine and the curl from the picture, the thickness of it, too.

Voldemort is thinner, gaunter, than his younger self.

But Sirius can see him. He can recognise him, now that the shock has passed.

(-)

Avery is as white as chalk, his skin making a ghastly contrast with his black robes. He is so lost in his head, he doesn't even question Sirius' presence.

Apparently, Bella made Sirius promise he'll attend the wedding. He doesn't remember this, but then he was quite drunk when he had dinner at Lestrange's Manor.

"Rod is away with business. I can't go alone! Someone is bound to irritate me so much I'll end up torturing them during the ceremony." She batted her eyelashes at Sirius, insisting he already promised to accompany her.

But once they got to Malfoy Manor, which Lucius was kind enough to offer for the wedding party, she abandoned him to Rabastan and now he ended up being dragged in a fancy room where Avery is getting ready.

Lucius and Yaxley, the only married men in the room, watch on in amusement as Avery is getting paler and paler.

Rabastan keeps offering Avery drinks, before Lucius stops him.

"We need him sober enough to say his vows," he reminds them.

Sirius has to admit he is having a bit of fun. Just a smidgeon.

He used to dread weddings when he'd been younger; he couldn't enjoy the occasional terrified groom, knowing in the back of his head the day will come for him to be in that place.

But now there is no such pressure, so he can just laugh at Avery.

"If it helps you, I'm sure your little bride is just as scared on the other side of the manor," Rabastan encourages Avery.

"Why would that help me?" Avery inquires, dazed.

Rabastan shrugs. "I don't know… at least it's not just you that's scared?"

"I don't want to do this," Avery says, refusing to stand when the time comes. "I can't."

"Sure you can," Lucius coaxes him. "It will be over soon."

"I don't like her," Avery insists, holding on to his chair, resisting any attempts to get him out of it.

"You don't need to like her," Yaxley says, patiently. "You only need to do your duty. If you're lucky, she will end up pregnant tonight and then you won't even have to see her that often."

"Just lie back and think of England," Sirius offers, making the others laugh.

Avery is not amused. “Shut up, Sirius!” he snaps. Then he frowns, and he looks more closely at him. “Wait, what are *you* doing here? Didn’t you run away?”

Sirius doesn’t answer. Yaxley keeps giving him suspicious glances.

“Am I hallucinating him?” Avery asks Lucius. “What did you put in my drinks?”

(-)

Sirius enjoys muggle parties- the muggle women clad in short jeans, the drugs, the loud rock music.

He enjoys some of the Order parties. Witches dressed in a mix of muggle and wizarding attire, the butterbeer and cheap whiskey. How laid back everyone is.

But *this*-

Sirius missed this.

The opulence. The elegance. The exquisite dresses and fine suits and robes. The smell of expensive cigars and the gleam of the crystal glasses.

Avery composed himself enough. After a brief attempt to make a run for it, he allowed Lucius to take him to the raised dais, where he’s standing, waiting for his bride to be.

People are staring at Sirius, more than they’re paying attention to Avery.

Some even stand to take a better look at him.

“He went back home?”

“Why haven’t I heard about this?”

“Walburga didn’t mention anything, and I saw her last week for tea.”

“You know Walburga, she only opens her mouth to insult someone.”

“I told you, didn’t I? I predicted he’d come home when Alphard’s gold runs dry.”

Sirius does his best to tune them out.

Finally, Bella appears and sits at his side.

“I was with the bride.” She giggles.

“Poor girl. Not only does she have to marry Avery, she had to put up with you.”

“I told her in great detail what will happen in her marital bed tonight. I scandalised all the virgins there. Cissa kicked me out eventually.”

Sirius snorts. “I told Avery to lie back and think of England.”

Bellatrix laughs. “It’s what mother told me when I married Rodolphus.”

“I know, I was there,” Sirius reminds her. They tried to kick him out because *‘boys have no place here, us women are helping her get ready’* but no one could keep him away from his Bella.

“Little did she know I was already fucking Rod for a year-”

“Gross!” Sirius makes a face, and she laughs harder. “Where is your mum?”

She rolls her eyes. “I assured you father and auntie won’t be here.”

She did. Otherwise Sirius would have *never*, for anything in the world, not even Bella, placed himself in a situation where he’d have to see Walburga Black.

“Someone broke into the Black estate in Paris. They went to investigate. Mum wouldn’t come to a party without her husband, proper doormat that she is.”

“I hear he got in trouble with the law. Figures he’d return with his tail between his leg and ask his mother to help him-”

Sirius clenches his fingers into fists but tries not to react.

The bride finally walks in, looking like she just had a good cry, her father practically dragging her towards Avery.

Everyone shuts up and enjoys the circus.

(-)

Rodolphus shows up some ten minutes after the ceremony.

“Avery didn’t chicken out, I see,” he remarks, sitting beside Sirius.

“I think Lucius had him under the Imperius,” Bella jokes. She’s taken off her ridiculously high heels and now her feet are in Sirius’ lap, hidden by the long tablecloth.

Narcissa, sat on Bella’s other side, slaps her arm. “Don’t say things like that! Someone could take you seriously.”

“-I saw him, too. I couldn’t believe it,” yet another voice says. They never *stop*. It’s mostly the older people. The young ones gave him a curious look or two. Some even nodded their

heads at Sirius. But the old… oh, they just can't help themselves. "The nerve to just show up-"

"If I were Lucius, I wouldn't receive him in my house-"

"Blood traitor-"

Sirius keeps drinking. Nothing else to do.

"What the fuck are you staring at?" Rodolphus asks loudly, eyes narrowed in the distance.

Two ancient men seated at a table nearby quickly look away.

"You know what they're staring at," Sirius says.

"They should mind their own business. If they're surprised to find you here, they can just fuck off."

"Rodolphus!" Narcissa warns. "I will not tolerate such behaviour in my house."

"But you'll tolerate them badmouthing your cousin, huh?"

"Leave her alone," Sirius warns him.

"Rod, behave!" Bella says at the same time.

"Fucking Blacks," Rodolphus sighs, taking one of the bottles placed in the middle of the table.

"They'll get over it, anyway," Bella says, patting Sirius' shoulder. "And if they don't, well, they don't matter that much. They're old and hopefully will do us a favour and die soon."

"I'll drink to that." Sirius raises his glass.

"Oh, there's our French cousin, Cissa! What's his name again? Didn't know he was coming." Bella looks at Narcissa, when a tall, dark-haired man walks through the doors.

Fuck. It's that Rosier cousin. The one Sirius kissed.

He feels the need to duck under the table. But he's a Black and Blacks don't hide, even when they want to.

"Still can't get over the fact are that you are related to the French," he says, loudly, to cover the discomfort that settles low in his gut.

"Our motto is 'Toujours Pur'," Bellatrix drawls, eyebrow raised.

Before Sirius can tell her Blacks are as pure-blooded brits as they are pure-blooded wizards, that the stupid motto was simply a matter of aesthetic, Rodolphus intervenes.

“*Cherie,*” he says. “*Our* motto is certainly not ‘Toujours Pur’. You forget you aren’t a Black anymore.“

“I can’t get over the fact that you married the French,” Sirius jokes and Bella cackles. “Please, do not reproduce. A half French baby is only *slightly* better than a half-blood.”

“I agree.” She snuggles closer to Sirius.

Rodolphus just sneers at them. “I was born in Britain,” is all he can come up with.

The Rosier cousin is coming closer. Sirius grabs a bottle and does his best to drink it fast, because he can’t stand the pressure.

Bella sighs, giving him knowing looks.

“I hate your mother,” she whispers.

Because she’s the only soul that knows about the events from that night.

Besides Rosier, his mother and father, that is.

She’s the only one to know that since then, he refuses to acknowledge his attraction to men.

Sirius snorts, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, scandalising Narcissa.

“No, you don’t. She was your hero, growing up. You try to hate her because I hate her.”

“My hero?” Bellatrix readjusts her position so she can stare at him.

“You’re both rabid men haters, going on about oppression, fighting the-“

Bellatrix laughs. “What did she fight? She fought a teenage boy. She’s far worse than an airhead like Cissy-“

“Excuse me,” Narcissa says, but Bella doesn’t pay her any mind.

“- that buy into the ‘men are stronger, we must follow them’ shite. Your mother knew the *truth*. But she still caved. I am eternally grateful she did, because that’s how you came to be. But a housewife that lived under her husband is *certainly* not my role model and never was.”

Bollocks.

Bellatrix thought *her* mother weak and frail; she was disgusted with Druella’s meekness.

She’d sit at dinners with Sirius’ mother, outdoing each other in scathing remarks about anyone around them.

“I fucking hate her guts for what she did to you.“

“Bella,” Sirius tries to warn her, between big gulps of firewhsikey.

“And how did you expect her to act?” Narcissa asks, her cheeks pink. “How do you think she felt when her ten-year-old son had more power and respect than she did, in her own house?”

“So that’s how you’ll treat your own son, if you'll have one? With bitterness and scorn?” Bella shoots back. She takes her legs off Sirius, to better face Narcissa.

“No, because I’ll make sure Lucius won’t tell a toddler that he’s more important than I am,” Narcisa responds calmly. “That is not, however, what uncle Orion taught Sirius-“

“Sirius never bought into that rubbish!” Bella is getting flushed, on the edge of her seat, shoulders pulled back. “He never believed women are inferior-“

“He didn’t, but it wasn’t for lack of trying on uncle’s part.” Narcissa lifts her chin, her pretty upturned nose into the air. “And while Sirius never acted his superiority with other women, he did with aunt Walburga-“

“His *superiority*?” Bella asks, strangled.

“Girls,“ he tries, putting a hand on Bella’s shoulder to calm her.

“What superiority?”

“Don’t answer that,” Sirius begs Narcissa.

“Men have power over women in our circles, whether you like it or not, Bellatrix.” Narcissa says. “I’m not even saying it’s just or deserved, but they have it and that’s a fact. You’re too old to close your eyes and deny it.“

“Well, of course they have power, when women like you aid them in stepping over our heads!”

“Time to go mingle,” Rodolphus says and Sirius could not agree more. He stands and follows the redhead.

Just in time, too. The Rosier cousin is quickly approaching the sisters, who are now hissing at each other, eyes narrowed.

Lily told Sirius about the British Women Liberation Movement, and he saw the muggle girls marching around London a few times, with their banners and slogans.

He wonders if Bella heard what the muggle ladies are up to.

She’d be a valuable member.

(-)

Voldemort stops mid duel, with no warning.

He was moving so fast, graceful and effortless, toying with Sirius and then, in the blink of an eye, there he is, standing still, hands by his sides.

It's so abrupt, Sirius doesn't have the time to divert the curse he already cast.

One of Voldemort's finger twitches at his side and the curse flies past him, harmless.

How the fuck does he do that?

Only a handful of months passed since Sirius imagined a duel between the man in front of him and Dumbledore.

He imagined it would be thrilling.

Now, after countless lessons, Sirius is half convinced Voldemort can easily blink anyone out of existence, without even drawing his wand.

"That's not fair." He hears himself complaining, like the spoiled child he is. Was. *Whatever.*

But Voldemort isn't even listening. He has his head tilted, eyes roaming over Sirius, a slight frown between them.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asks, growing more and more uncomfortable, especially when Voldemort walks towards him.

His fingers curl tighter around the wand, but it doesn't make him feel any safer.

A wand always meant safety for Sirius. If he had his wand in his hand, nothing could go wrong.

Until he met Voldemort. Faced with him, Sirius' greatest weapon is as efficient as any wooden stick a muggle child picks up at the park.

"What are you doing?" His voice gets a little high, which Sirius doesn't appreciate. At all.

But Voldemort just moves past him. Even *worse*, a cold hand settles on Sirius' shoulder from behind.

Even if he's uncomfortable, it doesn't cross his mind to move. He stands there like a stupid rabbit, pinned down by a wolf, as Voldemort circles around him.

He finally stops when he's facing Sirius again.

"Dumbledore and his followers say we are all born the same," Voldemort finally speaks. "They don't quantify magic. We all have it in the same way; some of us just work hard to master it better than others."

A brief pause. His fingers are still resting on Sirius' shoulder. Not a grip. Not even close.

“Do you agree?”

“No,” Sirius says, speaking with his heart, with the Black arrogance he usually tries to filter through a more rational thought process.

But it’s hard to use that filter with Voldemort acting so strange.

A soft smile. “Of course you wouldn’t. Purebloods insist they are born with more magic. A theory on which they base their superiority. Old blood is more powerful than new blood.”

Their superiority. Not Voldemort’s.

“A theory you endorse,” Sirius reminds him.

Voldemort takes his hand away and Sirius breathes easier.

“I must, in these circles.”

It’s Sirius’ turn to smile.

From all their talks, snippets of conversation here and there, uttered between heated duels, he thinks Voldemort despises purebloods just as much as he does muggleborns.

As any half-blood would, really. He doesn’t belong anywhere.

Sirius knows how it feels to be hated on both sides. Not for his blood, of course. But for his morals. Or lack of morals, depending on perspective.

Too soft for his family, too cruel for anyone else.

“We are not born equals. Some of us have more magic than others.” Another brief pause. “Yet the purebloods are just as mistaken as Dumbledore. I have travelled far and wide. I’ve seen studious purebloods, hardworking and diligent- for all their efforts and lineage, they were average.”

“You don’t need to travel far and wide to see that,” Sirius says. “I could have spared you time and money and just asked you to dine with the Goyles for a night. I’m not even sure they can use a wand to float a teacup.”

A sharp laughter. “I’ve seen remarkable mudbloods, here and there. Rare enough, but they exist.”

“I’ll give you a million galleons if you say that in front of Rodolphus,” Sirius mutters.

“Do you have a million galleons?”

Yes. In his vault, in the bowels of Gringotts, being kept safe by a dragon.

“No.” In his vault, left behind by Uncle Alphard, the gold is dwindling quite fast.

“Magic chooses its vessels. Regardless of blood. *Despite* of it, sometimes. We are not all the same, and we will never be the same, no matter how much Dumbledore wishes it so. And you, Sirius…” Voldemort tilts his head again, eyes flashing red. “You are special.”

Sirius knows. He tries not to think that way- he really does his best. But he knows it, deep down.

He’d known it since he was a toddler, exploding things at will with incredible precision.

He went to Hogwarts and done better than anyone in his practical tests, even if he rarely picked up a book.

He doesn’t think he’s special because he’s a pureblood. He knows that’s not true.

Sirius is special because he’s a *Black.*

Like little Nymphadora is special because she’s a Black, even if her blood is not pure.

“I know,” he says, shoulders straightening with pride.

He doesn’t want to care about what Voldemort thinks of him, but it’s impossible.

He can see why Death Eaters are rumoured to fight for his attention, to outdo each other in this man’s eyes.

Voldemort keeps looking at him. And then, spoken so softly, like a gentle wind on a hot summer day-

“You have no idea.”

Voldemort reaches out for Sirius again. But this time his fingers rest on Sirius’ chest.

“Since you were born, they told you to control yourself. To contain yourself. *Blacks don’t scream, Blacks don’t cry, Blacks don’t laugh. Blacks don’t fear.*”

Sirius swallows. It is abhorrent to hear those familiar words in Voldemort’s soft tone.

“And then, suffocated, you ran to Potter. To Dumbledore. You sought permission to be yourself. But you didn’t get it. *Don’t lash out. Don’t hurt people. Don’t get angry.* Am I right, Sirius? Did you hear that, over and over again, from the very people that were supposed to accept you as you are? Quite judgemental they are, for a group that preaches tolerance. ”

Sirius refuses to answer.

“Magic feeds on emotion.”

“I know,” Sirius hisses, uncomfortable.

“But they don’t let you feel. Your family, your friends. Worse of all, you don’t let yourself feel. You suppress yourself. You shove any emotion into a tightly locked place. You shove

your magic there, too. Your true potential."

Sirius just stares at him, mesmerised.

"You remind me of a boy that used to pretend, that tried to lock away his rage. He had no proud father to tell him he's not supposed to cry or laugh or show any sympathy. He learned on his own. And he was extraordinary." Another smile, the most vicious one for the night. "But not *unique*. If you'd comb the world, you'd have found someone else like him, here and there."

His fingers move, just a little, to the left. Right above Sirius' heart.

"Only when he embraced himself- when he let go of society, of silly notions about good or evil; when he walked off the beaten path, abandoned his name, his face- only then he became unique."

Sirius knows that name now. He knows the face, too. But he desperately wants to know *more* about that boy.

"Your pride comes from your name; the way you are perceived, too. The fear you inspire. Everything I have is my own. Everything you have is given by others. Who are you if I strip away your name? If I show you how to cast aside all the expectations placed on your shoulders- who are you when there is nothing left to hide behind?"

Sirius steps back and Voldemort's hand drops to his side.

No one can take away his name. Sirius wants to spit at Voldemort's feet, laugh in his face, say that of course Tom Riddle wanted to get rid of a muggle name. But Sirius is not like that boy. Sirius comes from greatness.

"You wouldn't get it, half-blooded no one that you are. Or do you get it? Are you jealous? Is that why you're offering to free me from the 'burden' of a powerful, ancient, noble name?"

By some miracle, some deeply buried sense of self preservation, he says nothing of the sort.

"Your parents allowed you anger, but not fear, isn't it so?"

"That's right," Sirius spits, that anger coming close to the surface. "What? Are you turning into Dumbledore now? He's the one to talk about conquering fears and-"

"Dumbledore is a liar." Voldemort's smile is gone, just like that. "He speaks of conquest, but what he means is acceptance. He wants you to face your fear and make peace with it, not *defeat* it."

His shoulders straighten, which Sirius didn't think possible. Voldemort is already straight as an arrow, but now he becomes even taller.

"Only when you will be free will your magic become pliant, obedient, ready to be called upon, at any given second, with no effort. Without a wand, even."

He doesn't move a muscle, but Sirius' wand flies out of his hand.

"Will you let me set you free, Sirius? Do you want to be extraordinary?"

(-)

He's in his bed, alone.

Or, well, with Tom Marvolo Riddle's picture. He took it off from the file, which is still hidden in his jacket.

What happened to you?

It could be dark magic.

His father always told Sirius that dark magic should be used in moderation.

"All branches of magic are a wizard's blood right, no matter what these traitors in the Ministry claim these days. But dark magic feeds on us. It can give you power, but it will take something, too. Never get lost in it. Never allow it to control you," he says, when he hands Sirius a book called 'The Secrets of the Darkest Art'. "You must learn it, you must be aware of it. You must practice it safely, but do not grow dependent on it. And even dark magic has several branches. This-" he points to the book. "Is not given to you as a gift. This is a cautionary tale of what happens when wizards forget themselves. When power, for the sake of power, clouds the mind."

It clearly fed on Voldemort. Dark magic takes, and it took his beauty, it ravaged his body. Dark magic leaves traces on the user, when it is taken too far, and the first sign is in the eyes.

But the boy in the picture had not yet paid that price. He couldn't have. It takes decades to get to the point where Voldemort stands now.

In the picture, he could have messed with dark magic all he wanted. He was still just a boy.

But there's something wrong, regardless. Something *different*. His eyes, unmarred by magic, still hold the secret of something terrible.

His posture, the way he stares almost unblinkingly at the camera- *what happened to you?*

(-)

James talks loudly, laugh forced and strained to cover the tension. Sirius stares at Sturgis and Dedalus. He understands what their chilliness means.

A Wizengamot vote took place last weak, one that ended in Rodolphus' and Lucius' favour. Sirius didn't vote, and the Order isn't pleased with him.

Dumbledore tried to assuage their worries, told them Sirius is young and needs time to acclimate himself with the proceedings, but no one accepted the quite frankly ridiculous excuse.

His recent arrest didn't help matters, either. Or the fact that rumours are flying about his presence at Avery's wedding.

James pretends he doesn't notice the new wave of distrust.

Lily's green eyes spark with dislike when she talks with those that give Sirius suspicious looks. Her tone is harsh. Lily never had much patience.

Sirius doesn't like it, wants to tell her he doesn't need her to get offended on his behalf. It's a tale as old as time, after all, and he's heard it his whole life, even when no words were spoken.

Blacks aren't to be trusted they said, with their mouths or with their eyes.

I could have you dead by morning, Sirius thinks, darkly, with a savage, uncontrolled instinct. He could just slip their names to Voldemort and-

He shakes his head and reminds himself he's not bothered by their mistrust, he'd dealt with it for a long time and wishing death on people simply because they don't approve of him would only prove their point.

(-)

Marlene screams at him and he screams back, in one of the most vicious fights they had so far.

Sirius hates screaming. It reminds him of his mother. Whenever he raises his voice, something in his head whispers *'you are just like her'*.

"I fucking hate you!" Marlene is in his space, her face red with fury, or with the strain of yelling for the better part of an hour. "Why are you such a dick?"

"I told you why! I need to be seen in public with other women! Don't you get it? If they realise there's something more between us, I'll make you a target!"

She throws her head back and laughs.

“A target? I am in the Order! I am out there fighting Death Eaters! A known blood traitor! I AM ALREADY A TRAGET, YOU WANKER!”

All this because he’d been photographed with a girl and Marlene had to wake up and see it in Witch Weekly, first thing in the morning.

“Maybe,” he spits. “But you don’t want to have *Voldemort’s* attention. I can’t give him another person to hold over my head.”

“I would believe that if you were just seen in public with a lass over a pint of beer. You don’t have to go to their houses and fuck them, though! Or do you take a reporter with you in the bedroom? Did you summon Voldemort to witness your fucking prick in her cunt, huh? Why did you fuck her, Sirius?”

“Because I wanted to! You don’t own me!”

Sirius had once more spent half of the night staring at that cursed photograph and he’d decided it was quite enough, that it can’t possibly be healthy.

So he sent a Patronus to Marlene first, *he did*, only she was busy at the hospital so he just went out and… well. He woke up in a witch’s house. Only the girl was roommates with another witch, that works with Marlene and here they are.

“You’re scared shitless because you’re actually growing close to another human being and you want to back out! You’re acting like a kid!” She slaps him. “Man the fuck up!”

“A kid?” He grabs her wrist roughly. “If that bothers you so much, McKinnon, maybe you shouldn’t have fucked a kid.”

(-)

After the fourth glass of fire whiskey at a shady pub in Knockturn, the fight doesn’t bother him anymore.

Evan Rosier finds him and sits at his table, and they spend the rest of the night drinking and bickering about old Slytherin- Gryffindor grudges.

No one told Evan that Sirius is a Death Eater. Clearly, they hadn’t, because when he sees Sirius accepts to drink with him, he keeps trying to subtly-not so subtly recruit him.

“I don’t know what’s bothering you, mate. You’re always bothered by something, Merlin help me, but I know a man that is the solution to all your troubles. *He*,” Evan says, putting emphasis on the word, ”can solve anything. He can make all your dreams come true, I guarantee it.”

Evan *believes* it. It's not sly Lucius lying through his teeth, saying what he thinks his interlocutor wants to hear.

Evan has a passionate look in his eyes when he speaks about Voldemort.

What the fuck did you do to all these people, to have them eating from your hand? Sirius wonders, so intrigued he even forgets about Marlene.

A distant part of him is frightened, because it knows what Voldemort did.

What he does with Sirius; the way he speaks, the way he can make anyone feel special, treasured.

You're a Black. He can't fool you. You've always been special.

Yet Sirius is not accepted. Even James, who loves Sirius more than he loves anyone in his life, perhaps with Lily's exception, never accepted the darker side of Sirius.

He'd seen it during that Shack incident, and James flinched away, stopped talking to him.

He'd stop talking to Sirius if he knew how much Sirius enjoys his lessons with Voldemort, how he looks forward to them.

(-)

She opens the door, but stands in the doorway, a hand on her hip.

Sirius is too drunk to speak, and he wouldn't know what to tell her, even if he'd be sober.

They stare at each other for what feels like forever, before she sighs, her shoulders slouching.

"Come in, you filthy dog," Marlene says, moving out of the way.

She can be a right bitch, she's self destructive and selfish, but she deserves better than him, even so.

He takes her hand on his way inside.

(-)

"Have you ever wanted something that you knew you will never get?" Sirius asks, balancing the chair on its back legs.

They just ended a meeting, a nerve-wracking act for Sirius, navigating Voldemort's questions about the Order, deciding how much to reveal, trying to say even less than Dumbledore allowed him to.

And now he will have to decide how much to tell Dumbledore from what Voldemort said to Rodolphus and Lucius, Bella and Rabastan.

Because Voldemort must be testing him, revealing plans, even a murder plot, most likely to see what Sirius will share with Dumbledore.

To top it all off, he'd very patronisingly ordered Sirius to stop getting arrested for foolish reasons, since one day an Auror might decide to check for a dark mark.

When Voldemort dismissed them, Sirius didn't get up like the others.

No one dismisses me.

So they left, and now Sirius is alone with Voldemort, who is looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Lord Voldemort always gets what he wants."

Sirius lets the chair drop. He gets up, walking closer to Voldemort. He takes out his pack of cigarettes from his leather jacket and sits beside him, where Lucius usually sits.

Voldemort seems amused by Sirius' antics.

That won't do.

Sirius lights a cigarette, waits to be reprimanded for it, but it doesn't happen.

"How about Tom Riddle?" he asks, and he gets a sense of *profound* satisfaction upon seeing that stoney face break, just a little. Not much. A muscle jumping in his jaw, a blink that comes too soon after the last one. "Was there something he wanted and never got?"

He knows he shouldn't have brought it up. He'd done an excellent job of keeping it to himself for about three weeks. But he can't anymore. He needs to remind Voldemort he's not just any fool he can trick with talks of greatness.

Sirius doesn't need Voldemort to be extraordinary. He was born that way and it is time Voldemort remembers it.

It is time Sirius remembers it, too. It would be very dangerous to forget. He'd end up like the others, kneeling for the attention of this man.

Sirius can smell the shift in atmosphere. The air becomes thick with danger. It gives him a thrill.

"Tom Riddle is dead," Voldemort says, very slowly.

Sirius smirks. “I get why you would want to shed the name. I wonder though, why Dumbledore is making as big of an effort to conceal your identity.”

He’s throwing Voldemort through a lot of emotions. A minuscule frown appears between his brows.

“I do not know,” he answers after a short break. “I never thought about it.” He sounds surprised.

Sirius takes another drag of his cigarette, lets the smoke fill his lungs, keeping it in longer than he should.

“Who told you?”

“Hagrid.”

The frown deepens. “Hagrid does not know what become of Tom Riddle.” Voldemort spits his former name, like it burns his tongue to say it.

“He doesn’t. But Hagrid told me of the Slytherin Prefect that framed him and Aragog. I know you went to school with mum and Hagrid. It was easy to surmise after that.”

“Aragog?”

Voldemort ruined so many lives it’s no wonder he forgot an insignificant spider.

“His pet Acromantula.”

“Ah.” Voldemort makes a face. “That Hagrid… Is it still alive, I wonder?”

“It sure is. Almost ate me some years ago.”

Sirius searchers through the inner pocket of his jacket and pulls out the file. Voldemort’s eyes are instantly attracted by the big, black letters screaming his old name to anyone that looks.

He takes it hastily.

His frown deepens before his eyebrows shoot up altogether. He looks terribly bewildered as he reads through the small file.

“Where did you get this?” Even his usually very controlled voice sounds astonished.

“That’s why I got arrested. I wanted to see if there was a record on yo- on that name. And there was.”

“I never knew it existed.”

Sirius shrugs. “How would you? Lucius could check, but for that, you’d have to tell him whom to look for.”

Of course, unlike Voldemort, Sirius harbours *no* illusions that Lucius doesn't know Voldemort's name. Even if he didn't get it from his father- if Sirius discovered it, Lucius would have, too. He just has the good sense not to throw it in Voldemort's face.

"And it doesn't exist anymore. I stole it."

There's a spark in those red eyes, terrifying and possessive as they stare at Sirius. It looks a lot like hunger.

"You are more than I expected, Sirius Black."

People regularly underestimate Sirius. Loud, brash Gryffindor, prankster extraordinaire. An irresponsible alcoholic.

"And you are less than I expected, Lord Voldemort." Sirius says, flirting with that danger.

He'd expected the dark lord to be just that. Vicious, cruel, cartoonishly evil, almost. He'd expected the dark lord to have answers to all the questions, and he doesn't. He'd expected him to be half a god. But he's just a man.

"You will never speak that name." *A terrifying man,* Sirius corrects himself, when the full brunt of those eyes falls on Sirius, accompanied by the deceptively soft voice. "I know you like to push, but do not push in this matter, or it will be the last thing you do."

'Everything I have is my own. Everything you have is given by others.'

A self-made man, down to his name.

Did he abandon it because he thought he could never be much with a muggle one? Surely not. Dumbledore is their most famous living person, and he's a half-blood, too.

Tom Riddle wasn't just Slytherin's heir, in itself a reason to boast, but he is so extraordinarily powerful, so intelligent he could have just as easily gather a following with any name.

Getting people to kneel to someone called *'Lord Voldemort'* proves that. They kneel because of him, not a bloody name.

Sirius has a noble name; Lucius, too. Far more respected than 'Voldemort'. Yet no one kneels for them.

When faced with his power, no one would have cared he was a half-blood, as long as he parroted pureblood beliefs. At the very least, everyone in his inner circle is aware he's a half-blood. Bella seemed to know it when Sirius called him one. And they do not care.

No, it wasn't for that reason. He didn't discard Tom Riddle so he could gather an army.

It must be a personal matter. Something deeply painful since it matters so much. Since it made him look *vulnerable* for just a second.

"He doesn't feel comfortable in my presence. It reminds him of who he used to be," Dumbledore once told Sirius.

Dumbledore, Sirius knows, calls him Tom. It would be such a Dumbledore thing to do.

"You have my word," Sirius says, solemn, holding Voldemort's gaze, even if it is hard.

It's so bloody intense, like a magnifying lens that can pick apart every tiny detail Sirius tries to keep hidden.

"So?" Sirius says, to break the tense silence that settled between them. "You never answered. Have you, under any name, wanted something that you never got?"

This time, Voldemort takes his time to answer.

He extends a hand, long fingered and pale towards Sirius, who barely suppresses a flinch.

But he only takes the half smoked cigaret from between his fingers.

Sirius watches as Voldemort takes a long drag out of it.

"Yes," he answers.

"How did you come to terms with it? Because I can't."

Sirius cannot let go of things he wants. They become obsessions, keeping him up at night.

Voldemort exhales the smoke, slowly. It surrounds him, and in the greenish light of the room, it could look like a snake. In that light, Voldemort's head could look like a skull.

"I suppose I didn't, now that I think about it."

Sirius leans forward, unconsciously, puts his elbows on the table, drawn in.

"Do you still want it?"

"No." Short. Concise. "I told you, Tom Riddle is dead, with all his wants."

"What was it?"

Voldemort smiles, puts the cigarette out in an ashtray that appeared out of thin air. "If you manage to figure that out, I will be most displeased."

"I do love a challenge."

Voldemort laughs. It transforms his entire face. It doesn't make him any less dangerous. Just… different. The smoke around him dissipates.

Lord Voldemort is less than Sirius expected in some ways. In others, he is far, *far* more.

Chapter 9

Sirius didn't think the house in Godric's Hallow could fit so many people inside it.

He shoulders his way through the crowd, and they are quick to part to let him reach his destination.

"Thanks," Remus mutters, grateful, when Sirius stops at his side, glowering at a couple of drunk Hit Wizard. They scamper off.

"You know you're not contractually obligated to talk to every motherfucker that wants to, Moony?"

Remus sighs. He's tired. The full moon just passed. He's not a party man in general, but especially not so soon after a transformation, when he's exhausted, very sensitive and just wants to be left alone to enjoy a book and a cup of hot chocolate.

But it's James' birthday. He wouldn't miss it.

"How come you aren't drunk yet?" Remus asks.

"I'm getting there." Sirius winks at Remus and pulls a bottle of firewhiskey from his jacket's inner pocket.

"I read an article in one of those Healer's publication today," Remus says, leaning on a wall. All the seats are taken, people mingling everywhere.

Remus often reads Healer publications, hoping one day he will see a cure for lycanthropy.

"And they said they can now easily regrow a liver, from your own blood. That's good news for you, Padfoot."

Sirius snorts. He doesn't think he'll live long enough for his liver to fail him.

Marlene's red, messy hair makes an appearance at the front door.

"Snog somewhere else, you're blocking the entry!" Her voice carries over even with a live band creating an awful ruckus in the garden.

"Fuck," Sirius mutters.

Remus watches him with an amused expression.

"I'll protect you," he teases.

“Nah, I reckon I’ll just get the silent treatment tonight.”

She’s got all the anger out of her system at Mary’s party when she caught Sirius in the bathroom with one of Mary’s coworkers.

He has a scar now, on his right hipbone, dangerously close to his cock. Marlene knows some nasty curses and apparently has no issues with using them in public.

“We promised nothing to each other, you know?” Sirius says to Remus what he’d tried to tell Marlene that night. “I don’t know where this delusion is coming from. We’re not a couple.”

“I think you’re the deluded one. I went to see her the other weak for a pain relief potion and when she opened the dresser- mate, it’s filled with your leather jackets. Your cigarettes are in her kitchen. Your guitar-”

“Shh, she’s coming.”

Remus laughs at him but changes the subjects, starts talking about some harpies wrecking havoc in Northern Ireland.

Sirius nods, pretending to listen-

He was right. Marlene strolls past them without looking in his direction.

(-)

“Kisses for the birthday boy!” James yells in Sirius’ face, making kissing noises.

Sirius is trying his best to keep James on his feet, supporting him in an upright position.

“Jamie, just make it long enough to cut the cake and then you can pass out somewhere.”

“Don’t call me Jamie,” he slurs, pouting.

His glasses are askew, hair messier than usual, face red from the booze and the heat of so many damn people in one room.

“KISS HIM!” someone yells, nearby, between howls of laughter.

“Kiss the birthday boy!”

“Who?” Lily’s voice drifts from another room. “Who’s kissing my husband- Hestia, give me back the tequila! God damn it, I told you, you’re supposed to suck on a lemon after! Here, I’ll show you! Marlene, where’s the salt?”

“I love you, Padfoot,” James whispers and his head drops on Sirius’ shoulder.

“Love you too, mate. Don’t start crying- oh, *come on*!”

James doesn’t hold his alcohol well. He sniffs in Sirius’ shirt.

“We’re getting old-”

“You just turned nineteen-”

“So old. Remember when we were skinny lads, mocking Snivellius? Oh, to be eleven again.”

“LILY!” Sirius shouts. “The cake!”

She’s left for it some twenty minutes before, but apparently she got distracted.

“She’s wasted, Black,” Mary says, loudly, laughing so hard she’s holding her sides. “She just sat on the cake!”

“There’s no cake?” James sniffs louder. “But I want cake!”

(-)

“Why don’t we chat for a while?” Peter blocks the door.

Sirius takes James’ glasses off his face and puts them on the nightstand beside the bed.

“Let’s chat over something to drink. Now that Prongs is safely in bed, I can let loose.”

“Too loud down there. Let’s talk here.”

Peter’s nervous. Fidgety.

Which is suspicious. He should be happy, what with the lipstick marks on the collar of his shirt.

It’s almost as if he doesn’t want Sirius to go downstairs.

He easily shoves Peter away.

“At least let’s go to the garden. Fresher air there,” Peter insists.

When they get to the first floor, he sees Lily on a table, teaching a bunch of witches and wizards the ‘robot dance’, as she calls it.

She always does that when she drinks.

Remus is snoring in an armchair, mouth open, head lolling in an uncomfortable way.

Peter pulls at his arm, insistent. “Come on, the garden-”

And then Sirius sees Marlene in the corner, straddling a man.

Sirius can’t see his face, her hair covering it.

“Now, now,” Peter says, a death grip on Sirius. “Don’t do something stupid! Lily will kill you if you start a duel in her house. Let’s go to the garden-”

“Who is he?” Sirius growls.

“Someone who decided to live a little dangerously,” Mundungus sniggers from nearby. “Kissing Sirius Black’s girl like that… that’s a death wish, if I ever saw one.”

“She’s not my girl,” Sirius says, controlling himself.

Not very well, though. A vase shatters to pieces when his magic lashes out.

Lily falls off the table and Sirius goes to check her over.

(-)

“And what is that one called?” Marlene points to a star.

“Procyon,” Sirius answers, his head on her belly.

“Show me yours again.” Her long fingers are tangled in his hair, lightly touching his scalp.

They are on the roof of James’ house, a transfigured blanket under them.

“See what you’d have missed if you went home with that bloke? What would that stupid mudblood know about stars?”

Sirius realises what he said at the exact time she does. She stops breathing, her stomach hardening under his head, her fingers gripping his hair.

“Shit. Sorry. I- I had a meeting yesterday. With *them.* It just- got stuck in my head.”

“Unstuck it,” she says sharply, but she relaxes. She sighs. “I hope he’s alright. You didn’t have to be an arse about it-”

“I’m *sorry*?” He lifts his head to better glower at her. “It was nothing compared to what you did to me at Mary’s-”

“Yes, to *you.* Not that poor girl I found you with. You didn’t have to hurt him-”

“He’ll survive.”

She sighs again and points to another star. “And what’s that one called?”

(-)

He wakes up choking. Sirius sits abruptly, trying to breathe.

He’d dreamed of Parkinson again; the blood in that office kept flowing uncontrollably. Sirius tried to stop it, tried to put Parkinson’s head back on his shoulders, but of no use. He was trapped in that room, and the blood kept coming, surrounding Sirius like the sea, until Sirius was submerged in it. It went down his throat and nose-

He shakes his head and stands up. He’d fallen asleep with the window open and it’s chilly.

Or maybe it’s just Sirius that’s freezing.

“It will go away, eventually,” he tells himself after he brushes his teeth, staring in the mirror above the sink.

The nightmares about Parkinson are not as often as they used to be. He hopes that they will stop when enough time passes.

“You don’t look so good, darling,” the mirror says.

Sirius sticks his tongue at it. He takes a long, hot bath, drinks from a forgotten bottle that was lying around the bathtub and he feels better. Warmer.

He braids his hair; the mirror approves. “That’s more like your handsome self”.

When he straddles his bike, he feels loads better already. Excited even.

He rides it for a while, waking up properly, the wind harsh against his face. He could Apparate -he will, eventually-only the sun is starting to rise, and it’s such a nice day, a pity to waste it.

He rides more than he intends, lost in thought, just trying to enjoy himself.

He gets pulled over by a police officer. Usually he likes to play, having them chase him through London, but this time the police officer is a lovely woman, also on a motorcycle, so Sirius pulls over.

She scolds him about his speed and demands his driving license. Sirius says he forgot it, spins a story about how he found his girlfriend cheating on him and he left in a hurry.

Her eyes soften, and he asks about her bike, complimenting it.

He is allowed to leave some ten minutes later. She doesn't try to give him a ticket, either. Sirius would have Confounded her if she insisted on that driving licence nonsense, but he tries not to use magic on muggles, if he can avoid it.

He stops at a gas station when he runs out of fuel- the bike can run without, of course, but magic will never give it the same speed petrol does.

The cashier doesn't have change for his twenty-pound note, so he insists Sirius buys something. He gets cigarettes and one of those strange foods the muggles have, wrapped in colourful plastic. It looks odd, but it tastes good, as most muggles thing do.

He gets back on the road.

The sun shines brightly high in the sky, close to midday when Sirius decides he might as well forgo Apparation all together. The lady at the second gas station told Sirius the place he's looking for is not that far away.

So Sirius pays attentions to the roadsigns, and he eventually gets off the motorway.

The countryside grows wilder around him; traffic is almost nonexistent. Sirius gets lost a few times, but eventually he finds himself facing a small sign announcing he's arrived in Little Hangleton.

Morfin's Gaunt file only listed "Little Hangleton" as address. And while the village doesn't seem big, Sirius can't exactly go door to door, can he?

He will, if he has to, but before he resorts to it, he decides to stop at a pub in the centre of the village.

He gets odd looks. The bike and the leather, the long hair- all things most muggles do not appreciate, he learned.

London is different, but he's far away from London, in a place the youth seemed to have abandoned, fleeing to bigger cities, Sirius imagines.

He enters the establishment- old, but well kept. Few patrons are around, and they all turn to stare at him.

He makes his way to the bar and when the man behind it doesn't have the few muggle brands of liquor Sirius knows, he sighs.

"Just give me what you have."

Not a friendly crowd, all in all.

Sirius slips a generous tip when he's served his drink. "I'm sorry, sir. I am looking for a family that lives around here. The Gaunt family. Would you mind telling me where I could find them?"

The bartender takes the note, frowning. "Gaunts, you say? Never heard of them."

Sirius pulls out his cigarettes, frustrated.

He imagines the Gaunts never associated with muggles, purists that they were. They considered most of the wizarding world unfit for their company, let alone muggles.

But still, in such a small village, there must have been some interactions.

He *knows* there were interactions, since Voldemort's father was Morfin's neighbour.

"Gaunts?" A chair scrapes close by and an old man stumbles his way to Sirius. "Did I hear that right?"

Sirius turns to him, excited. "Yes, sir."

The man sits beside him. "Aye, he-" a nod to the bartender- "wouldn't know about them. Too young."

The bartender is not young, by any means, but Sirius doesn't point it out.

The old man waves an empty glass. Sirius gets the point.

"Please, can you bring the gentleman whatever he chooses? My treat."

The bartender snorts, but pulls a bottle from under the counter.

"What's your businesses with that lot?" Half-blind eyes look at Sirius from under bushy, white eyebrows.

"They're my relatives," Sirius says.

The man might be drunk and old and blind, but he's not *that* blind.

"You don't look like 'em. City boy with your posh accent..."

Go fuck yourself, you old geezer.

"I'm from the good side of the family," Sirius says, evenly. "Different branch. We lost contact long ago. May I offer you another drink?"

"Aye. Leave the bottle," he tells the bartender, who looks at Sirius.

Sirius nods, slipping him money.

Only after his liquor is secured does the man speak. "Sorry to say it, lad, but they're all gone. Been gone for a long time."

Sirius knew it was unlikely to find Voldemort's mother here, but he still hoped he might.

"Strange people. Very strange." He leans in closer and lowers his voice. "Some used to say they were Satan worshipers."

“Oh,” Sirius says, gauging this Satan business is something to be outraged at.

He’s not well versed in Christianity, but he knows the basics.

“Their names, their clothes- must have been a cult. Marvolo- who names a child Marvolo, I ask you? And that boy of his- always with snakes around him. Wherever he went, there was a snake close by. People swore he could control them. Violent and vile, both of them.”

“Was there a girl?” Sirius asks, offering the old man a cigarette.

“There was a girl,” he confirms with a smirk. “People called her a witch.”

Sirius laughs.

Muggles often speak of witches; in the countryside they are still afraid of them.

In London, a muggle man published a book about something called Wiccans, to Lily’s amusement.

Sirius met a few of these young girls that call themselves Wiccan and have altars and fake wands and spells. It amuses him to no end, how dedicated they are to fake magic. It pleases him, too- they can babble nonstop about nature and the moon, but they are very interested in what they call ‘sex magic’. There is no such thing as sex magic, of course, but who is Sirius to shatter their dreams?

“No laughing matter, lad. You young ones don’t know, but-” he looks ahead, lost in his mind for a second, and Sirius remembers most muggles are not like the Wiccans. That they *hate* magic. “In any case, she was cursed with ugliness, like any witch.”

Don’t spit on him, that would hardly be productive.

“Or so they say, I never saw her face. Meek, thin little thing that she was. Always kept her head down. But she’d sell herbs to some of the old women, read fortunes in tea cups for the young ones. Or so they say.”

“They say a lot,” Sirius huffs.

“Who’s to know? The Gaunts were a mystery, all sorts of wild rumours around them. We had a drought, or a disease? We blamed it on them, devil worshipers that they were. But no one could touch the Gaunt men. Some villagers went up there to drive them away, but nothing ever came of it. We learned to avoid them. But the girl was easy pickings. She wouldn’t fight back when she’d come to the market and people threw rotten fruits at her. No one wanted her around, and we showed it.”

Filthy muggles, Sirius thinks, enraged.

And then, Lily’s voice is in his head, telling him not all muggles are alike and Sirius feels guilty for the internal outburst.

“What happened to them?”

The old man grins, excited. “You saw that big manor up the hill when you came in? Of course you saw it,” he adds, before Sirius can answer. “Impossible not to, innit?”

“Yeah,” Sirius agrees. A grand building, imposing, looming over the village.

“The Riddles. As different from the Gaunts as you can imagine. But just as hated. Of course, no one dared show it. Rich bastards; they owned half the village. Did you know, they were the first to have a car? When they brought it in, children ran after it, all the way up the hill.”

Sirius can’t imagine a time where cars were a novelty. They’re all over London now, a nuisance.

“Bloody aristocrats.” He actually spits on the floor.

Sirius takes offence to that, as well. This man despises witches and rich folk, and Sirius wishes he could-

He’s an old man, he reminds himself. *It doesn’t matter.*

“Noses up in the air, always looking down at us. Thomas and Mary wouldn’t be caught dead down here, secluded in their small castle. But the lad- Tom-”

Sirius swallows.

“Oh, he came down, alright. He was a handsome devil, entitled, with that posh accent of his-” he gives Sirius a glare. “He deflowered half the young girls in the village.”

Good for him, Sirius thinks. A man after his taste.

“All their fathers were frothing at the mouth. Some even made noise that he should marry one disgraced daughter or another.” He laughs and spits again. “As if! He was engaged to one of his own, a rich girl from the next village. But-” He grins again, rubbing his hands, showing Sirius rotting, yellow teeth. “But then, he deflowered the wrong daughter.”

“The Gaunt girl,” Sirius guesses.

“Right you are! I forget her name. Something silly, like the others. Morfina or- no, that was the boy-”

“Merope.”

“Yes, that’s it. Merope, ha! What a stupid name-”

“It’s from Greek mythology.” *You uneducated peasant.* “A water-nymph.”

“A what, now?”

“Never mind.”

“The *scandal*! I don’t know what old Marvolo did to them- no one knows what happened- but Tom Riddle married Merope Gaunt, with only the priest as witness, and then they disappeared. Along with the Gaunt men.”

Sirius remembers Morfin’s first arrest; Marvolo’s third. They didn’t disappear, they were sent to Azkaban.

What would this muggle think if I were to tell him poor, devil worshiper Marvolo Gaunt would consider rich, posh Tom Riddle a vermin, unworthy of his bloodline?

“The maid at the Riddle house said Mary would weep all day in bed, and Thomas would drink all day in his office,” he continues, laughing with pure glee. “They scorned honest men, good men, that came to demand Tom marry their daughters after he ruined their honour, and they rejected them all. And now their precious son married the tramp’s daughter. An ugly witch.”

He drinks some more. Sirius drinks too. That’s an odd love story. Uptight rich muggle with an ugly, poor witch from a blood purist family.

He only knows of Andromeda to come from such a background and marry a muggleborn. But Andromeda is beautiful, and Ted is a *wizard.* She wouldn’t be caught dead with a muggle. She tells Sirius she’s still uncomfortable when she visits her in-laws, rarely enough.

“Alas, it didn’t last long. Tom returned a year or so later- I forget, but it wasn’t too long. Without his wife. There were rumours Marvolo was sighted around town, too, but no one was sure. Some say he died.” He shrugs. “But Tom was back, even if he rarely left the mansion after that. Maid said he had an awful temper. Doctors came from London to see to him, she said. For what, no one knows, but apparently they were *psychiatrists.*”

Sirius isn’t sure what that means. He’ll have to ask Lily.

“No doctor put him back to rights. The Riddles remained up there and spared us of their presence. That Morfin lad came back, though.” He nods to himself. “We’d see him walking about now and them, terrifying the women and the children, always with his snake, his knife and a short wooden stick. His sister never returned, so he had to come down to the market himself.” He shudders. “Disgusting creature. But he’s gone now. He’s been gone for many years. The Riddles are dead, too. Some people say Morfin disposed of them, you know? Because he seemed to vanish right after they were murdered. But who’s to know? He came down to the village so rarely that he might have been gone for months before the murders.”

“But what did the mugg- what did the police say?”

Sirius knows Morfin killed the Riddles, but he’s curious what the muggles made of it.

The man spits again. “Incompetent fools. They arrested Frank.”

“Frank?”

“The gardener. Old loyal dog. He was released, and now he’s still taking care of that big mansion. The police decided they had died of natural causes. Bloody fools! As if an entire family decided to drop dead at dinner. Ha! But they said there was no evidence of violence.” He leans into Sirius, conspiratorially. “It was probably a cover up. Perhaps some other rich clown wanted to inherit or something and the police helped them.”

“Right,” Sirius says. “So Merope never returned? Or her son?”

“Son? She had a son?” The old man frowns. “Might be she had, why else would Tom marry her? Be careful lad, that’s how women trap you; they get heavy with child and-”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sirius waves it away. “So, no news of a son.”

“No. She never came back, nor any mention of a son. You’d think he’d have come to get his fortune, if a child existed.”

Why didn’t you? Sirius wonders. Voldemort would have been seventeen when the Riddles were murdered. Why wouldn’t he claim his father’s money?

“That mudblood, with his horrid accent, and second hand robes.” Sirius’ mother had said, in the discussion Sirius overheard as a child.

So why didn’t he come for the money? He was an adult so he could have-

Adult. No trace. He could do magic all on his own.

Sirius gets a twisting feeling in his stomach.

He leaves the pub and looks into the distance, at the immense Riddle Manor.

(-)

He twists and turns in his bed before giving up on sleep.

Frank the gardener didn’t want to talk to Sirius. Paranoid man, he’d started making a fuss when Sirius tried to insist, threatened to call the police and hobbled inside.

When he went for the Gaunt house, Sirius found dark trespassing spells around it, felt them just in time to stop.

They could have been put in place by Morfin, or by Voldemort himself. Sirius decided not to trigger them, in case it was Voldemort.

He saw the...it was hard to call it a *house.* He saw it from a distance, a decrepit, tiny shack. He was appalled that the Heirs of Slytherin ended up in that place. Such a noble bloodline, so pure, so rich, once upon a time- and there the shack was.

It made him feel deeply uncomfortable.

He Apparated back to his house and paced around his living room until he grew tired.

But now he can't sleep.

He went looking for answers, but he only has more questions. And no leads on Merope, either.

Is she dead, too? Did Voldemort kill his father? Did he kill her, too, and Sirius was mistaken to believe he's hiding her somewhere?

But he looks so sane, a part of Sirius protests. He's a killer, he's ruthless, he's *whatever*- but killing one's parents, that's a step too far, isn't it?

What sane man would kill his parents?

One a muggle, of no threat.

What the fuck happened?

Sirius must know. He can't stop thinking about it.

Marlene accuses him of cheating on her, when he refuses to see her two days in a row. But he's just pacing around his house, mind whirling.

He can't let it go.

(-)

The guards look severely confused to see him there.

Sirius' temper is particularly short, already, due to lack of sleeping. The Dementors' proximity doesn't help.

"I am a representative of the Wizengamot," Sirius barks at them, in an office right inside Azkaban's entrance. "If I want to inspect the state of this prison, it is my right."

The guards exchange looks. They aren't sure how true that statement is. Sirius isn't too sure, either.

"But we received no notice, sir-"

"It's a *surprise* inspection," Sirius says. "The Wizengamot is interested in knowing if you are doing your duty, or you are just wasting our money. Letting you know in advance would only give you time to prepare."

More confused looks.

“Are you *denying* me entrance?” Sirius asks, voice lowered, giving his best impression of his father. “You will let me in, or you won’t have a career tomorrow. Or *worse*,” he spits and lets the threat hang in the air for a bit.

He’s dressed in the finest robes Bella gave him. He put on a heavy gold watch, too.

But he doesn’t have his ring, and he feels that if he had it, the guards would comply.

They do, even without it.

After a hushed exchange between them, they make him sign some papers and he’s taken on a tour.

Tour. As if he’s on holiday.

Sirius grows cold, fast. He despises Dementors. He can hear his father’s last words in his head, on a loop. His mother screaming Sirius is not her son.

“You’re just like your family,” James says, disgusted, standing over Remus’ hospital bed. Remus has his back turned to Sirius, doesn’t even acknowledge him. “How could you do that? Snape almost died! I almost died trying to save him! Why, Sirius, why?”

Parkinson’s head flies through the air-

Sirius shakes his head, and shoves his hands in his robe pockets, to hide how hard they are shaking.

“I’ll be fine on my own. I want to talk to the prisoners and they won’t answer truthfully in your presence.” Sirius says.

The guard blinks at him. “They can’t answer any question, I’m afraid. Their minds- most of them forgot their names.”

Evil. It’s not a word Sirius puts much weight on, but if something was to be called pure evil, it is this.

Torturing people in such a manner… Sirius would rather die.

Five minutes in, with Dementors at a distance, and he’s losing it. Some prisoners have been here for years.

Sirius rips the parchment out of the guard’s hands. “I’ll manage,” he says, forcefully.

He’s sneered at for his name in the circles he chose to run to. Judged.

But out there in the world, his name opens any doors. People cower before him, and Sirius likes it.

"All you have is given by others," Voldemort says. "The fear you inspire."

They don't fear Sirius, they don't respect Sirius. Just his name.

But I am a Black, so what's the distinction, Sirius asks himself, eyes roaming over the list of inmates.

He locates Morfin relatively fast and starts climbing the stairs to the fourth floor.

Two Dementors float after him, and it's so hard to keep his back to them. He was never very sure how much control the Ministry truly has over the creatures.

Enough for them not to attack the guards, Sirius reassures himself.

By the time he finally reaches Morfin's cell, Sirius is numb with cold. He can barely feel his fingers.

Impossible they would be related, he thinks, staring at the pitiful sight through the bars.

Morfin is… beyond definition. Sirius had never seen a human being in such a condition.

He's unresponsive, and no wonder. No matter what Sirius says to him, he keeps muttering about a lost ring.

And Sirius saw that ring. Saw it on Voldemort's long finger. *Now, how did the ring end up there?*

Sirius pulls out his wand and compels Morfin to come closer.

"Legilimens," Sirius whispers, and then he's in a world of pain and fear.

So much fear, so cold. Hungry.

My father will kill me for losing his ring, he thinks. He'll kill me for losing the ring.

"Never surrender this," his father tells him, sternly, giving Morfin the ring.

Sirius digs deeper, past the trauma induced by the Dementors, past the fear and desolation.

He kills the filthy muggles. They always bothered him. Animals.

I should have done it long before.

He feels nothing when he does it.

Avada Kedavra, and the man falls. And then again, and the other does. One more time and the woman is gone.

Morfin is calm. Empty. He has no feelings, no thoughts.

But he's gleeful when the Auror comes. He should be gleeful. He must.

"I killed them," he brags. "I killed the filthy muggles."

Something is not quite right with the memory of the Riddle murders. It's too clear, *crystal* clear, with amazing detail, after decades in Azkaban. Unlike all his other memories.

There's no thought process to it, no emotion. Sirius pushes hard, wills his magic forward, shoves-

Morfin yells and then-

Tom Riddle comes through the door and it infuriates him. How dare the muggle come-

But it's not him. He speaks the sacred language. And he's too young to be the muggle.

Sirius watches the memory play out, watches as Voldemort quickly learns his father lives over the hill.

Then it goes to black. Nothing. And there is Voldemort again. *Agitated.* He's trembling all over. Pale, far paler than he'd just been, with a desperate look in big, brown eyes.

He breathes heavily, and he puts one hand on his chest, as if he's in pain.

And then he turns his wand on Morfin and whispers a spell.

"You killed the Riddles, because they were filthy muggles," Voldemort says, voice intense. "You will confess to the Aurors. It will be your pleasure. You've wanted them dead for a long time."

Sirius stumbles back, shocked, heart wild in his chest.

Morfin stares at him, more aware than he's been minutes ago.

"HIM!" He yells. "Him! It wasn't me-"

Fuck! Fuck!

"It wasn't me! It was him! The boy!"

"Shhh," Sirius plasters himself to the cell, his hand over Morfin's, who's clutching at the bars.

"I didn't kill them!" He keeps yelling. "I didn't kill them!"

No one will believe him. Surely, a lot of prisoners claim they are innocent. Who will believe him?

"I DIDN'T KILL THEM!"

The guards will hear. They'll hear and come to investigate and they'll find Sirius there, and Morfin yelling-

Voldemort. Fuck, Voldemort will kill Sirius.

“Shut up, shut up!” Sirius says, but Morfin doesn’t listen, only howling louder.

The two Dementors come closer and closer. Others join them, drawn in by the misery and fear-

Sirius is panicking, like he never panicked in his life. Morfin won’t stop shrieking.

“Suffoco,” Sirius says, wand pointed, desperate.

He has no choice, no choice.

His father is dying in his head, the Dementors closer and closer in reality. His mother’s screams are sharper and they mix with Morfin’s.

But Morfin is suddenly silent. Sirius sees him as if from far away, grasping at his throat, trying to breathe. But no air will come through, not if Sirius won’t cast the counter-curse.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says, over and over. “I’m so sorry!”

Morfin collapses on the ground, eyes fearfully searching Sirius’.

It seems to take an eternity before he dies, but it couldn’t have taken that long.

Pure terror overwhelms Sirius.

“I live on in you,” his father says. He’s gripping Sirius’ hand, but he barely has the strength to do it.

Sirius cries, struggling to breathe. “Please, please- stay with me-”

His father’s eyes are as calm as ever, even when he’s drifting away. “Look at me,” he whispers. “I will never leave you. I am in your blood, in your veins. I live on in you.”

Sirius’ world shatters. When his father closes his eyes and lets go of his hand, Sirius knows a part of him is gone. Forever.

When he opens his eyes, the Dementors are hovering close to him. He’s crunched down by a wall, and he realises he’s hidden his head between his hands.

He stands on unsteady legs. “Step away,” he orders, but his voice is shaking.

The Dementors don’t move, and it’s so hard to keep his worst memories at bay with the creatures so close.

“Get away from me,” he tries again, voice slightly harder, and they finally part and allow him passage.

Sirius runs from the corridor, but he stops by the stairs. He’s only aware how sick he is when he throws up.

He leans on the wall, inhaling deliberately.

Fuck, what did I do?

You did him a favour. He's better off dead than in this place. You gave him peace.

Maybe once he's out of this hellhole, Sirius will bring himself to believe it.

There's also the pressing concern that he killed someone. In Azkaban. If he's not careful, he'll end up in Morfin's cell.

No. No. That will never happen to me. I won't allow it.

He vanishes the spilled content of his stomach, and he thinks it through.

(-)

"Why is there a dead prisoner in a cell?" Sirius barks at the guards. "Is that how things work around here? You just let them die and rot there? You should notify his family, at least. I know he must be a criminal, but this lack of respect for his relatives will not be tolerated by the Wizengamot."

"What? A dead- who?" The guards panic. "We made our rounds this morning-"

"Up on the fourth floor," Sirius says.

Two guards immediately get out of the office and run up the stairs.

Sirius sits, because he doesn't think he can stand anymore. He's still shaking.

"I've never seen a dead body before," he offers as an excuse. Better they think him weak than the alternative.

"We are so sorry, sir. I swear, we did our rounds, and everyone was alive-"

Minutes later, one of the guards return. "Gaunt," he whispers to the other. "He is dead."

They search through files, hurriedly, while Sirius sips from a glass of water that was offered to him.

"He has no relatives," one of them tells Sirius.

"So, what happens in that case?" Sirius wonders, though he knows what happens.

"We just bury him on the island."

Sirius nods. There is no reason for them to hand Morfin's corpse to anyone.

No Healer will be there to determine if there are signs of magic on him. If it was a suspicious death.

“We are truly sorry, sir. I-”

“It’s fine.” Sirius stands. “These things happen. He didn’t look like he was dead for long, in any case.”

They nod, relieved.

(-)

“You seem unwell,” Voldemort says, some five days later, at the cabin.

Great. He’s only been there for five minutes and Voldemort already caught on something is off.

Perhaps because you can’t look him in the eyes.

Sirius is so terrified, so guilty about what transpired in Azkaban, that he fears Voldemort will know it as soon as their eyes meet, even if Sirius is a good Occlumenes.

“The burden of having a conscience,” Sirius says, inspecting his nails. “I suppose you wouldn’t know much about it.”

“Can’t say that I do,” Voldemort agrees.

The man killed his father. And he didn’t do it to take his money, apparently, since he never claimed the fortune. Even if he desperately needed the money, from what Sirius’ mother said.

He killed his father, and he sent his uncle to Azkaban.

Of course he has no conscience.

Well, you killed Morfin, so maybe you should get down from your high horse.

I did Morfin a favour.

He shakes his head. He’s had the argument with himself for days now.

“Let’s get it over with,” Sirius says, drawing his wand. Maybe a heated duel is what he needs. A little adrenaline, a way to release all that stress inside him.

“Sirius.”

No one says his name like that. There's something alluring, intimate about it, like Voldemort knows Sirius in a way no one else does. Like he sees Sirius in ways no one else does.

It's an illusion, of course. Bella knows Sirius, James knows Sirius. His damned *mother* knows him far better than Voldemort ever will.

But that's the problem, the danger, with the dark lord. That he's made of illusions. Every word out of his mouth, every inflection in his voice, is meant to persuade, to bewitch.

With each encounter, he understands more why so many people pledged their lives to this man.

"Yeah?" Sirius answers, tense.

"These meetings aren't meant to be a burden to you. I certainly have no pressing need to teach you anything. I do it as a favour to you. I was under the impression you enjoyed our duels. If you aren't in the right disposition, you are free to leave."

Sirius does meet his eyes, then. So very different from the brown ones Sirius saw in Morfin's memory.

Voldemort was scared in that memory; he looked vulnerable. He'd just killed his entire paternal side of the family.

He's not that boy anymore. He's collected, eyes steady, posture relaxed.

"We can put an end to the lessons, if you consider you learned all you wanted to learn."

What does it mean? What is Voldemort hoping to gain with these games? Is he so certain Sirius will reassure him that he wants to be there? Is that what he wants to hear?

Sirius is quite certain that if he said 'alright, let's end the meetings' Voldemort wouldn't be pleased at all.

"This is a favour?" he asks. "You're taking time of what is surely a busy schedule just to show me some tricks? How selfless of you," Sirius spits out.

A muscle jumps in Voldemort's jaw, but otherwise his patient facade remains in place.

"I promised I will teach you the dark arts. You asked for it, remember? When you were on your back, in your old house, interested to know what curse was causing you such pain."

He's so frustrating. He confuses Sirius greatly.

"You have potential, but if you chose to waste it, if you want to be just another Death Eater, you only need to say it."

Sirius thinks of several answers. One more dangerous than the other. He's caught, as always, between a desire to provoke Voldemort and the apprehension of what might happen if he's successful in that endeavour.

One day, Sirius will find out.

But not that day.

“I want to be here,” he settles on the truth.

He likes the duels. The dark magic.

The promise of power beyond most people’s reach.

Those hours where he can be himself, where there is no one to judge him, in any way. No politics to navigate.

Voldemort smiles, satisfied. “Then stop pretending that you don’t.”

“I’ve had some rough days, is all. I’m tired.”

Voldemort eyes roam over Sirius’ face. “I hear the Wizengamot is in a frenzy, trying to pick a new Sacred Family.”

Sirius looks away again, since they’re in Morfin territory. Not even two hours after Morfin’s death, the Wizwngamot called an urgent meeting, happy to be rid of the Gaunt chair, excited to give it to someone else. “Yeah. We’ve been in and out of sessions for close to a week. And they all try to talk to me, hoping I’ll back their choice.”

Should Sirius acknowledge Morfin’s death? After all, Voldemort knows Sirius is aware Morfin was his uncle.

But he also told Sirius to mention nothing about Tom Riddle, on pain of death.

What could he say, anyway? *‘Sorry for your loss?’*

“Is Dumbledore asking you to support Prewett in his attempt to instate the Longbottoms in the Wizengamot?”

“Of course he is.” Sirius rolls his eyes.

“But Lucius says you won’t.”

“I’ll stay out of it. I said I won’t use my vote, and I won’t. Not for any policy and not for *this*. I don’t give a fuck about it, in any case.”

Voldemort doesn’t ask Sirius to back Lucius in the Wizengamot, and Sirius didn’t expect him to.

Both he and Dumbledore agreed from the start that Sirius won’t vote. But Sirius knew Dumbledore will be the first to try to push him into voting.

He also knows Voldemort will do the same, but not *now*. Not when he’s still trying to win Sirius over.

Because that's the difference. Dumbledore knows Sirius is on his side, so he doesn't feel the need to tread carefully around Sirius.

Voldemort, however, is not convinced at all of Sirius' loyalties. Voldemort is trying to charm him.

Sirius killed Morfin in a blind panic, without imagining what that would mean. The Gaunts are officially extinct with Morfin's death, and the Death Eaters are trying to gain the new seat, and Dumbledore is trying to stop them.

People try to bribe Sirius, Dumbledore says he understands Sirius won't vote, in general, but- *'at least this once, too much at stake, we can't allow Voldemort access to another seat'*; even *Crouch* asked Sirius over for a cup of tea.

Lucius is running around in circles, with promises of rewards to everyone that would listen- only everyone is rich on the inherited side of the Wizengamot. So Rodolphus goes with Lucius, toying with his wand, in case Malfoy gold proves not to be incentive enough.

All this because Sirius could not let matters rest; because he's obsessed in figuring Voldemort out.

(-)

Sirius is in the process of instructing Lily how to drink a Hungarian Horntail shot without melting her face when an explosion shatters the windows of the pub, located in the middle of Diagon Alley.

"What the-" Lily drops the shot when James pushes her to the floor, to protect her from a hundred shards raining over them.

And then the screams start.

"Death Eaters! Death Eaters!"

Sirius jumps over the table, to be as close to James as possible.

"Death Eaters, run!"

"HELP!"

Out the broken windows, he can see a stampede of people running away. He understands that the explosion must be further away than he'd imagined.

A powerful curse, to travel so far.

“We have to help,” Remus calls out over the pandemonium, trying to make his way to the door.

“Yeah- Lily you go home with Peter-“

Lily, getting up, glares at James. “I can handle myself!”

“Prongs, take her home,” Sirius begs, but too late, Lily is already following Remus, James after her.

“Get out of here!” Sirius shouts at Peter, over his shoulder.

Peter’s pale, frozen by the table.

“Leave,” Sirius orders. Peter is not a fighter.

Those that know how to Apparate are doing it, a sequence of pop-pop-pop peppered through the screams of those that can’t Apparate.

How is it possible so many wizards never learn to Apparate? Sirius thinks, shouldering his way through the crowds, eyes on James.

You can’t go there, another voice stirs in his head, now that the initial shock is gone. *You’re a spy, for Merlin’s sake. You can’t get involved.*

Sirius easily discards the thought. No way in hells is he leaving his friends alone.

Another wave of magic makes its way down Diagon, smashing windows as it goes.

An earth splitting curse, Sirius guesses, as the ground trembles underneath their feet.

He can recognise Bella anywhere; even if her voice is distorted by the magic in the mask, even if her shape is concealed, it wouldn’t matter. Sirius recognised her long before he sees her, her magic calling to the magic inside him, familiar, sweet and destructive.

Besides, few people would be powerful enough to cast such a curse. Sirius can count them on one hand and still have fingers left.

The closer they get to end of the alley, the emptier the street gets.

There- no, *four* Death Eaters.

Bella is indeed one of them. Sirius can see her wand, as it holds three Hit Wizards at bay.

Rodolphus and the other two are on the other side of the crater she made down the middle of the street. He’s blocking the door to an old building. The lights coming out the broken widows tell Sirius there are more Death Eaters inside it.

A few Aurors in civilian are there, trying to reach the building, but there is no going past Rodolphus and his two mates. Sirius can’t recognise those.

Sirius takes hold of James' robe, pulling him back.

"We shouldn't get involved," he says.

Remus throws him a vicious look over his shoulder, and Sirius knows why.

Sirius used to be the first in every brawl, eager to fight. For him to avoid a confrontation now…

"Try to take Lily and leave," James whispers, understanding Sirius' position.

Only he doesn't, not at all. Sirius can't abandon James there.

Green light blinds them, and one of the Hit Wizards drops to the ground. Bella's mocking laugh echoes on the street.

His Bella- the sweet girl that sang to him, pushed him on a swing. The girl that made crowns of flowers to place on her littler sister's head.

He knows, he always knew there is more to her than that. He'd seen that little girl play with lethal potions when she was thirteen, she'd seen her practice the Cruciatus on small animals at fifteen.

But to hear her laughing after taking a life- Sirius shivers.

"Not so eager to play with me anymore?" she taunts the other two Hit Wizards, who back off, shocked.

Her voice is unfamiliar, the magic on the mask making it almost unrecognisable.

Crazy as she is, Sirius intends to drag his friends towards Bella; she knows he will never forgive her if James gets hurt. She'll abstain from inflicting irreversible damage.

And there is no danger *she* will get hurt, either. Both James and Remus are decent duellists, but they can never hope to hold a candle to someone like Bella.

It's the best choice. Rodolphus is even more accomplished in battle and he doesn't care about James or Remus or what hurting them will do to Sirius; he'd take profound satisfaction in ripping Lily to shreds, especially.

So Sirius points to Bella. "The Hit Wizards need more help!" he shouts, and luckily, everyone seems to agree.

Bella makes a deceptively easy target, alone on the side of the crater as she is.

We'll all make it through, Sirius thinks.

Prays, really.

A series of *cracks* pierce the air; Aurors Apparate all over the street. And Bella is alone, a line of Aurors separating her from the other Death Eaters and Sirius' group.

At the same time, AntiApparition wards go up to keep the Death Eaters in. Sirius feels the charms settle in place around them.

"We'll only get in the Aurors' way," Lily says sensibly. "Let's help the injured. Try to evacuate the rest."

There are plenty of injured, fallen around, and Remus quickly moves to help.

Go for Rodolphus, go for Rodolphus and the others, please, please, Sirius begs silently, willing the Aurors to somehow ignore Bella-

He's out of luck. Moody, Scrimgeour, Indira and Savage all head to Bella, while the rest of the team heads for Rodolphus and his friends.

Bella laughs, high and distinctly feminine, charms on her mask or not.

"Oh, the big boys. What shall itsy-bitsy me do now?"

Her wand moves so fast, Sirius can't follow it. He's forced to take cover when the lamp posts in their vicinity turn into hideous monsters with big, glistening fangs, descending upon the Aurors, shielding Bella.

Moody swears, but before his words are out, fire reigns around them.

Not Fiendfyre, luckily, but fire nonetheless.

It engulfs everything, fast.

When the Aurors put it out, the amount of smoke is overwhelming.

Blinding and suffocating, only brilliant coloured spells visible through it, Bella's laugh heard above it all.

Fuck, when did she become so damn powerful?

"Got them!" A deep voice yells from the building Rodolphus is protecting.

"We'll make a path for you," Rodolphus shouts back.

The Aurors clear the smoke just in time to see a couple of Death Eaters coming out of the building with two hostages over their shoulders. One of them is a child. She's crying and she can't be more than ten years old.

Sirius shouldn't, he shouldn't get involved-

But there is a child in harm's way.

“Circle them in!” Moody bellows and the Aurors try, but Bella won’t let the ones on her side advance, and Rodolphus shatters any defence before him.

The Death Eaters pass through with their victims and Sirius can’t just stand idly. Especially when James is heading in their direction.

He rushes at them, a few Aurors joining Sirius, yelling at him to fuck off.

“It seems you need all the help you can get, mate!” Sirius shouts.

And who the fuck are you? he wonders, when one of the Death Eaters, the one carrying the adult hostage, sends a nasty curse that Sirius barely sidesteps in time.

The Death Eater with the child waves his wand and Sirius instantly recognises him. Mulciber; the younger one. He and Sirius bought their wands the same day at Ollivanders, many years before.

Sirius curses him, but misses; so does one of the Aurors. It’s hard to get Mulciber, since he’s hauling a child, and no one wants to hit her-

Mulciber cats a spell Sirius doesn’t recognise. It’s aimed for James, and Sirius jumps in front of him, taking it instead, the curse making contact just under his ribs.

“SIRIUS!” James roars, catching him.

“I’m alright,” Sirius says, surprised. He is alright. There’s no pain, even. Perhaps Mulciber messed the spell up, somehow.

Even more Aurors show up, all around, coming from the side streets, a sea of red robes, effectively trapping all the Death Eaters inside. Sirius has never seen such a large task force.

There’s no way Bella can make it out of this.

Sirius panics. “Go find Lily! I can’t see her and Remus.” Sirius says, and James is looking around in alarm.

“I think she was helping an injured man, near the apothecary-“

“Go, go, I’m right behind you,” Sirius lies.

“I’m not leaving without-“

A scream pierces through all the other loud noises.

Bella. It sounds pained. Sirius turns, as in slow motion-

Next, Rodolphus’ scream comes, an animalistic, loud growl that sends shivers down Sirius’ spine.

Through the red robes, he sees Bella. She’s injured.

And that's that. Sirius pushes James away, and he shoulders his way through Aurors.

A bright orange light passes by Bella's head, only by a fraction of an inch.

She snarls, twirling between curses and debris, her wand moving fast, absolutely chaotic.

A second curse sent by Moody grazes her side, and Sirius advances towards him. There is no thought into it, no plan, just the *need* to keep her safe, to get her out of there. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Rodolphus trying to make his way to his wife, casting Killing Curses left and right, lighting up the street with green.

Someone is yelling out Sirius' name, possibly James, but everything is distorted in his head. The only thing that matters is Bella, blood coming out from under her mask-

"But who are these enemies, papa?" Sirius asks, frightened. His parents always speak of enemies, of traitors, of people that try to destroy their family.

His father holds Sirius' hand in his much bigger one; the other caresses Sirius' cheek. "If they don't have our blood, they are our enemies."

Everyone on that street that is not Bella becomes his enemy.

"We fight for what belongs to us. We show no mercy, Sirius."

"Call *him*!" Rodolphus yells at someone. He is not very far, but to Sirius he might as well be a thousand miles away.

His only focus is Bella, who will be overwhelmed soon.

"They can't escape," Moody shouts. "Scrimgeour, get out of that lunatic's range," he points at Rodolphus, who's losing his mind, fighting at least seven Aurors. "Easy, they can't escape, crowd them in and be vigilant!"

We'll all die here, Sirius thinks. Because he will go down with Bella.

At least we're together.

"Black, get the fuck out of here!" Moody snaps, seeing him. "Who let him pass? Savage, take him away!"

The air warps around them, becomes oppressive, unnatural as the AntiApparation charms bend and *snap.*

Voldemort stands in their midst, in one of his simple black robes, hair neatly tied back, eyes red burning.

Sirius breathes out.

Strange how immediate the silence is.

All the noises from before, the barked orders, the screams of pain, the groaning buildings and the hisses of curses rushing through the air-

All gone, as everyone takes Voldemort in.

He so very rarely shows up in public, preferring to unleash his Death Eaters on the population from time to time. It helps with the superstition, the secrecy that surrounds him, the idea that he is out there, yet no one sees him.

The strange peace lasts only a second before it breaks.

A ripple of panic goes through the Aurors, more screams coming from the noncombatants trapped in their homes or in the stores.

Sirius only feels relief.

Bella is saved.

The veil of panic lifts off his mind, the street gains clarity, noises don't come distorted anymore.

He realises he's come very close to Moody. *Extremely* close. But the Aurors don't notice him anymore, their attention captured throughly by Voldemort, who just stands there, as absolutely every wand around turns on him, spitting curses.

Red, blue, yellow, green, orange- they fly in a rainbow, like missiles Sirius saw in muggle movies, only far prettier even if just as lethal.

Voldemort waves his right, wandless hand, and the curses go up and down, left and right, clashing against each other, smashing into Aurors instead, into buildings and the pavement or flying harmlessly into the sky in an explosion of colours and noise.

With his left hand, he moves his wand in an elegant, unhurried arch.

Oh shit! Sirius uselessly raises his hands to cover his face, in an instinct to protect it from what is coming. He's fucked, right in the front line-

The blast that comes sends at least nine Aurors flying.

But not Sirius. And not Moody and Savage, who are right *next* to Sirius.

Voldemort comes between them and Bella.

James' voice gets louder, desperate, calling Sirius' name.

Moody and Savage attack- all the other Aurors that were dealing with the Death Eaters have now turned to Voldemort.

Brave, brave men.

Really, Sirius' respect for them skyrockets.

Voldemort moves his wand again and Sirius alone is flying backwards, away from the Aurors.

An invisible force picks him up and throws him. The air whooshes past him as he travels impossibly fast through it. Yet it's nothing like the previous blast that surely killed the first round of Aurors.

The impact is painful. His back hits something, and he comes to a sudden stop, even if he has to blink several times to make sure he's actually on solid ground again.

Sirius landed on his back; just really unfortunate he landed on a solid piece of metal. He hears a crack and feels a sharp pain in his back

It knocks the breath out of him, and there's James, trying to lift him. They're at a relatively safe distance, at least thirty feet away from Voldemort.

In the second it takes for Sirius to stand, another Auror goes flying. Impossible to recognise who, because there is no head attached to the body.

"Merlin," James utters, terrified.

Sirius tries to breathe. Definitely cracked a rib or two. "We have to leave. Now."

Pop-pop-pop.

Sirius turns his head and sees Death Eaters Disaaparate away; no one pays any attention to them, not with Voldemort there.

Rodolphus is the last to go, Bella in his arms. Before he goes, he points his wand up and the Dark Mark shines brightly in the sky above them.

Once he's alone, Voldemort cats another spell- the consequences of which Sirius can't observe, obscured by rows of Aurors.

"Sirius, come on." James pulls his arm. "We have to go!"

Brilliant green light a little away catches Sirius' attention. He turns his head.

A dead Auror. Another one, that is. There are many on the ground. Sirius thinks he recognises Indira's black braid hidden under one of the bodies.

His stomach twists, painfully, and he doesn't know if it's caused by Indira, or the curse Mulciber hit him with, or whatever injury he'd suffered in his fall.

He gets dizzy, dangerously so, and crumples to the ground.

Get yourself together. Stand.

Sirius tries, but he just can't.

Screams of pain echoes everywhere, and he wants them to shut up. He has a massive headache.

When he moves his head at the right angle, he can clearly see Voldemort.

He is definitely holding back on me, he thinks. He knew that Voldemort was only playing in their duels. That he was only playing all those months ago, when Sirius first met him.

He ploughs through the Aurors that now surround him on all sides. Trained men and women, the wizarding world's elite forces, and they can't even land a hit on him; not on their own and not even together.

We'll lose the war. The thought comes with a certainty he rarely felt in his life.

Sirius knows, watching Voldemort move with inhuman speed, that the war is lost, only most people haven't realised it yet.

He truly doesn't look like a man.

He's a myth come alive from some ancient, forgotten legend.

Sirius was raised with magic. It's been a part of his life since he was born. He was always amused by the muggleborns with wide eyes when witnessing simple spells, with moving staircases and other mundane things.

He feels like a muggleborn, like he's only now faced with magic for the first time in his life, as he watches Voldemort perform spells that Sirius didn't even imagine in his wildest fantasies.

He's so enthralled by the sight he doesn't notice James, nor hear him, until he's shaken.

"Can you hear me? Sirius! Sirius!"

Sirius rips his eyes away from Voldemort and all the pain returns to his body instantly.

"Yeah."

James is bent over him, hair more wild than usual, his glasses askew.

"Thank Merlin! I thought- for a second I thought- come on!" He pulls Sirius up, again.

"We have to get you to St. Mungo's. You'll be ok, Padfoot. You'll be fine. Alright? Just a little longer. Just stay awake-"

"'m fine," Sirius tries to say, but he only leans more heavily into James.

The street shakes under their feet. A gong like noise goes off and then silence.

Sirius looks around wildly.

He can't see Voldemort anymore.

"Stay inside!" a magnified voice- Dawlish, Sirius thinks- says, when someone looks out of a window. "He might return."

"He's gone?" James asks, but there is no one close enough to answer him. "Hey, Sirius! Stay awake!"

"Hmm?" Sirius asks, startled.

"Alright, let's try to Apparate. Hold on, yeah?! I've got you."

(-)

"I'm fine," Sirius insists, when James takes him to St Mungo.

He's not fine, but it's so chaotic there, Aurors brought in on stretcher after stretcher, Healers running around. It makes Sirius' headache worse.

"They're busy enough as it is," he says.

"We'll wait here patiently until they have time for you," Remus says. He has soot on his face. He came with Lily a few minutes before James and Sirius arrived.

Lily is fine, just volunteering to help sort out the less injured people all around the packed reception.

"This is nothing. I've had way worse!"

"Sirius, I heard a crack when you fell," James snaps.

"Look at how hard you're working to breathe, you idiot," Remus backs James up.

"Peter?" Sirius wheezes.

"He went home. He sent a Patronus to let me know he's safe," Remus answers.

"What's wrong with him?" a harassed young Healer in training asks, hurrying their way. Her robe is stained with blood. She has a shocked expression on her face, as if she can't quite believe what she's been dealing with in the past minutes.

"I'm positive he broke some ribs. He hit his head, too," James says, holding Sirius in an upright position.

She waves her wand at Sirius. "Head is fine," she says, surprising Sirius. It feels like his head will split in two, any second. "Rib is broken, though. Someone will have to put it back in place. Don't move until a Healer has time for you. It could pierce your lung or heart-"

“And he was hit with a curse,” James adds.

“Huh?” Sirius manages to exclaim. “Oh, right.” The one that was meant for James. “Did nothing, though.”

“Where?” the Healer asks. James points at Sirius’ left abdomen.

She lifts his shirt and frowns. “I can’t see- “ she points his wand at him and performs a complicated movement. “There is *something,* but I don’t know what.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Sirius reassures her. “Go, take care of the really injured, will you?”

She takes his wrist, his *left* wrist. Sirius pulls it back, hissing at her, hiding his arm behind his back.

She’s in such a hurry she doesn’t think anything of it, focused only on her job.

But Remus notices. His eyes move from Sirius’ left arm to his eyes-

She grabs his right arm and taps his wand on his wrist. A faint pink light surrounds it. “You’re definitely cursed with something,” she mumbles. “If you weren’t, it would be green. But pink is not so bad.”

She looks at James. “Someone will come eventually to fix his rib. When there’s time. Wait here. And if that-” she points to Sirius’ right wrist. “turns red, you call out. Red is an emergency, got it?”

“Got it,” James says and then she’s off, making her way through a sea of people crying for attention.

“Moony, can you get me some water, please?” Sirius asks and Remus goes. “Listen, I can’t stay here,” he tells James. His ribs hurt like hell, make it hard to breathe.

“Sirius, you’re cursed with an unfamiliar-”

“They can’t see *this*,” Sirius whispers, and nods to his left arm.

“Oh.” James’ goes even more pale than he’s been. “Oh. What do we do?”

“I’ll go home-”

“You’re hurt!”

“And wait for Marlene. It’s just a broken rib. I’d had that plenty of times. Remember when I fell off my broom in that quidditch match?”

“But the curse-”

Sirius lifts his right arm. “If it turns red, I’ll go to Dumbledore. He’ll find me a trustworthy Healer, yeah? He’ll know what to do.”

“Ok,” James whispers, hesitant. “Ok. You should go to Godric’s Hallow’s. We’ll be right over. Let me find Lily.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine home. I’ll wait for Marlene. She’ll heal me once things calm down here and she can leave.”

“No! You can’t be alone, what if you get really sick-” James shuts up when Aurors bring Moody through a fireplace.

James heaves, covering his mouth.

Other people aren’t so careful and they throw up.

Moody is only recognisable by his uniform, adorned with medals.

Half his face is torn, bloodied. But it’s the eye that almost makes Sirius’ breakfast make its way up his throat.

His eye is hanging loose, dangling around his face like a pendulum.

Dawlish is screaming at some Healers, holding Moody gingerly. The Head Healer himself comes out of a back room, a stricken expression on his features.

Sirius carefully walks out of the hospital, holding his side, and no one stops him, not even James, who can’t seem to look away from the disaster.

Alastor Moody, their fiercest fighter, the most accomplished Auror.

But no one is accomplished enough for Voldemort.

(-)

Back home, the headache gets worse. Bouts of nausea come and go. He can’t sit or lie down, because of his rib. It’s easier to breathe when he’s standing, only he is so dizzy, he’s staring to see double.

He leans on a wall, the one closest to the liquor cabinet, and opens a bottle of Odgen’s finest.

In the silence, that seems so strange after the last hour, Sirius thinks. Or tries to.

Now that Voldemort isn’t in Sirius’ line of sight, Sirius can think of him as a man again, god-like status put on hold.

If Sirius does his job right, if the Order and the Ministry have their way and Voldemort is defeated, Bella will go down with him.

He doesn’t understand how he hadn’t realised this very obvious fact before.

Caught up in the fight as he'd been, it was only about the next mission, about rebellion and keeping James safe, surviving through the next day.

He can't get the image of her surrounded by Aurors, *injured*, out of his head.

Only after he witnessed that it dawns on Sirius that Voldemort's defeat means Bella's death or her imprisonment.

Your brother's, too. Regulus has a dark mark on his arm. Eventually, someone is bound to discover it. Someone would talk and-

Sirius breathes painfully, his ribs protesting at the motion. He takes another sip of firewhiskey.

He can't stand anymore, vision swimming.

He's lies down on the floor of his living room, consumed by fear.

And if Voldemort wins, which seems far more likely, it means James and Lily will die. Marlene. Remus and Peter.

"We will win. And because we are on his side, when we take over Britain, we can ask for favours." Bella pats his arm, comforting. "Think about that when your stupid little conscience troubles you. Think that you can ask for Potter's life, once the war is done."

She smiles up at him.

"You can save your blood traitor friends. If you help the dark lord, if you become dear to him, he'll grant you their lives."

James is certain to be allowed to live, if Sirius begs enough. And Marlene- her bloodline is old and pure, even older than the Potters.

Voldemort gives werewolves rights, or so he promises; Remus should survive if he joins Greyback's pack.

And Peter is a pureblood, too.

James, Remus and Peter didn't do much fighting yet. The few fights they were involved with- they caused irrelevant blows to Death Eaters.

From all the Marauders, it's Sirius that did the most damage to Death Eaters in combat.

Marlene, though- Marlene did *years* of fighting. Her brother is an Auror. Her surviving brother. The dead one was also an Auror. Her sister trained for a Transfiguration Mastery under Dumbledore.

Well, the sister and brother will sadly have to die. But Marlene-

She'll be fine. She's pure, and if Sirius needs to kneel at Voldemort's feet and beg that she at least be allowed to leave the country, he will do it.

Lily will die.

Every muggleborn, not just Lily. It will be hell on earth for them. They'll be hunted, rounded up, executed.

Sirius' stomach turns. Nausea and something else, something painful, throbbing. The pink light around his right wrist, left there by the Healer, is turning a darker shade.

Sirius ignores it, lost in thought. Lily, dead. Lily, hunted-

But if Voldemort loses, Bella is done. Regulus. Lucius- what will become of Cissa? The Lestrange brothers. Not that Sirius cares much about Lestrange, but- half the Sacred Families will be decimated, fallen in disgrace.

Fuck, Sirius thinks and he would panic if he could. As it is, his ribs don't have the luxury of panic; hard enough to breathe as it is.

(-)

Marlene's fox Patronus find him in the same place he'd been in since he came home.

"We're swamped; it's bad here. I heard you were injured. Please come if it's urgent, and I'll find the time. If not, stay put and I'll come to you as soon as we stabilise the situation here."

"All good. I'm fine." Sirius sends a Patronus back.

(-)

The pain shooting up from his left arm wakes him from the fitful slumber he's fallen into at some point.

Sirius shivers. For a second he's confused, doesn't know where he is. It's dark all around and he's wet.

Did it rain on me? he thinks, sluggish.

He yells in pain when he tries to move. Everything hurts. He thinks his dark mark is burning, but with all the other pains, it's hard to be sure.

I'm home, he thinks, trying to distinguish through the darkness. It didn't rain on him, he's just covered in sweat.

The spell the Healer put on him turned *black.* A solid black, pulsating around Sirius' wrist.

Mulciber didn't fudge up the curse, after all. Whatever it is, it's taking hold, spreading slowly but efficiently inside Sirius.

When he lifts his T-shirt, Sirius can see hundreds of black veins on his abdomen.

Maybe I should go to St Mungo, he thinks, groggy. But he stays on the floor, lacking the energy to move. *You can't go, in any case. They'll see the mark.* Somewhere in his head, he knows this is urgent, but the rest of him can't feel the urgency. If anything, his bruised or broken rib bothers him far more.

It's fine. Marlene will come eventually. She'll fix him up. She always does.

The Healer said to worry if the spell turns red. It's not red. She didn't say anything about black.

Sirius tries to keep awake, but he falls back into unconsciousness.

(-)

He wakes again. The pain is horrendous. All his insides feel like fire. He lifts his shirt, and he's bleeding.

But his blood is more black than red.

Black blood, he thinks and laughs. He chokes and coughs, which only brings more pain.

He's *hot*, and his abdomen cramps every other second.

He can't think straight. His head is filled with Voldemort. With Voldemort in the cabin, talking in a low voice, fascinating knowledge coming out from his mouth. Sirius can't help but hang on to every word.

Voldemort drinking tea, smiling at Bella in Lestrange Manor, asking if she's making progress with the winter garden that she's so fond of.

Voldemort in Diagon Alley, laying waste to human life.

Voldemort from the picture hidden away in Sirius' nightstand, young and stiff and beautiful.

Voldemort from Morfin's memory, scared, desperate.

Voldemort who is ripping their world into two, who has the power of life and death over Sirius' loved ones.

What happened to you? Who made you this way? What is your weak spot?

Where is Merope Gaunt and what exactly had she done to her son to turn him into… whatever he is.

Blood oozes out of Sirius' abdomen, black and thick. Black. It always goes back to family, doesn't it?

They can run away, but how exactly does one outrun the blood in their veins?

Sirius has to find out who Voldemort is. Not just his name. But *who* he is. He has to understand.

He stands, clinging to the couch. Once on his feet, only his will holds him upright.

His dark mark is burning; Sirius sees the dark mark over Diagon, the skull and snake reigning above death and pain.

He makes his way out of his house, slowly, carefully. He's dying, he thinks, but he won't die in this strange place, in this *not home.*

He won't die before he finds out about Voldemort. He refuses.

He Apparates away.

(-)

The wards embrace him, welcome him, the blood that feeds them, his father's blood instantly recognises the same blood in Sirius.

Home, home, home, his heart screams in his chest.

But he can feel how weak the wards have become. His father died months before, and it's been years since he last added his blood to the wards, since before he fell ill.

Impenetrable, imposing fortress Grimmauld is not as safe as it used to be.

It hurts to be back in that hallway. It hurts because he remembers thousands of times in his childhood standing in that very spot, hanging to his father's robe.

"Don't leave, papa! Take me with you!" he would beg.

And his father, proud and tall and dressed in power and wealth, would laugh and say he'd be back for dinner.

"Be good for you mother, Sirius. Take care of Regulus."

Sirius can almost see his father's tall shape in the doorway.

He stumbles to the right, knocking over the troll umbrella stand.

The walls themselves shift to catch him, give him something to hold on to, becoming narrower, like a cocoon made of concrete that will not let Sirius fall.

"Take me to her," he wishers, lips on the cold stone, and the house obeys. Sirius only needs to walk, slowly, until the walls shift, leading him to an open door.

And there she is.

The woman that had once been his mother.

Once upon a time, she'd wear her hair free, a cascade of black silk covering her shoulders, framing a younger face. A loving smile.

But it's been so long ago Sirius thinks he must have dreamed that woman, made her up in his imagination.

It's nothing like the woman in front of him.

Bitter, hair pulled back in an elegant but strict style, pulling at her skin.

There's no kindness in her eyes, no love. No smiles.

"What are you doing here?" she demands, standing up from Sirius' favourite couch.

After work, his father would have a glass of wine; he'd sit on that couch and take Sirius in his lap and tell him stories of the past, about long dead family members. Great men and women that built their society.

She is dressed in black. Dress, robe, shoes- all black.

Black doesn't show dirt. It doesn't show weakness. It doesn't show pain.

"How dare you? Get out!"

Sirius advances, dripping blood all over her expensive Persian carpet.

"You have to tell me-" he whispers, holding to his side.

He, too, wears black. It doesn't show blood as quickly as other colour would.

"How do you imagine you can simply walk into my house, after everything? Get out! GET OUT!" She advances to him but then stops, abruptly. Her eyes leave his face and travel down. "Sirius?"

The room spins around him. The flames from the fireplace paint shadows on the walls, threatening and familiar.

The portraits on the walls all look like his father.

“You have to tell me about-“ Sirius says, and he stumbles forward. “About Tom Riddle. You have to tell me-“

He must lose a second or two, because she’s suddenly in his face. She tugs at his hand, that is gripping at his wound.

Sirius looks down. His fingers are stained with blood. It’s on her hands now, too.

“Tell me about Tom Riddle.“

“Do not say that name!”

And oh, how Sirius remembers the screaming, the exact pitch of her tone.

Their eyes meet, and Sirius has never seen her so scared.

Or if she’d been, in the past, it was only visible in the set of her shoulders, in how angry she grew, defensive. The cause was always Sirius’ father. He’d provoke a simmering, furious kind of fear in her.

But it was never like this- never wide eyed, pupils blown with panic, colour draining from her face.

How dare you, you filthy half-blood, Sirius thinks, outraged and delirious. Hare dare Voldemort waltz into Sirius’ world and frighten a Black? This Black.

Sirius’ *mother.*

I’ll destroy you, he thinks.

“Why did you call him a mudblood?” Sirius insists, resisting her attempts to pull his hand from his wound.

She’s grown frail. Skinny. Her skin is stretched thin over her long fingers, adorned by jewellery.

There was a time when those hands carried him around the house.

A time where they would smack Sirius, and he’d felt the power behind them.

Now she can’t even pull his hand away.

“Don’t say that!” she screams again.

“Why did you?” Sirius screams right back. “Did no one figure out he was a Gaunt? Did no one see his mother at the Platform-“

“He was an orphan!” she says. “If we’d have known… if he’d had said something… but we didn’t know.”

An orphan.

Sirius was way off with his assumption.

He thought Merope Gaunt was at fault for whatever is wrong with Voldemort. He’d thought that if he found her, he’d figure Voldemort out.

Orphan.

For an absurd second, Sirius feels betrayed. He’d thought he’d had that in common with Voldemort.

On the other hand, he feels relieved. No, having a shitty mother won’t turn Sirius into a dark lord.

Sirius must have lost another second, because Kreacher is suddenly there.

Sirius kicks him straight in the face, though the movement unbalances him. He almost falls, but it was worth it.

Hitting Kreacher brings him a vicious pleasure.

The filthy animal, always snitching on Sirius, spying on him for his mother, getting him in trouble.

All the hate Sirius could not direct at her, he directed at Kreacher.

She’s trying to pull him over to the couch, her fingers in his leather jacket, insistent.

“Let me go.”

“Help me with him,” she orders and Kreacher, always loyal, approaches Sirius again.

“Don’t you fucking touch me, you foul beast,” Sirius barks at Kreacher.

“Take his wand.”

Who’s wand? Sirius wonders, extremely dazed.

It’s only when he sees Kreacher clutching Sirius’ wand that it registers.

He lunges after the elf, but his mother is still clinging to him with one arm. With the other, she takes out her own wand-

And then nothing.

(-)

He wakes in his bedroom, one of his muggle girls staring at him, straddling a motorcycle, half naked.

For a second, he is horribly, terribly confused. Because he can't be in his bedroom. He'd left, so long ago-

He shouldn't be there. His bedroom is no longer his and his dark mark is *burning*.

He tries to sit, but a hand on his chest stops him.

Sirius looks to his left, and there she is.

Fuck. He'd come home!

And that was fine when he was fucked up, dizzy, on death's door. But now he's alive. With his *mother* there.

There's a bottle of firewhsikey and a glass on his nightstand and Sirius cringes.

She'll yell at me for it and it's too late to hide it-

He shakes his head. He's not a teenager. He's not living there anymore. And the whiskey is *not* his.

His room is intact. The posters on the wall, he understands. They have a permeant sticking charm that would be bothersome to get rid of. Not impossible for Kreacher, but maybe it could be explained away.

But his muggle tape recorder is on the dresser. His muggle records are all over his desk. He recognises his transfiguration homework.

His Gryffindor tie, on the back of his chair.

It's as if Sirius left it there only mere minutes before, instead of four years.

She's watching him from the armchair beside his bed.

"I did what I could, but you need a professional healer. As soon as possible. I can't tell what's wrong."

Her voice is *ice.*

She's staring at his dark mark and only then Sirius realises he's naked from the waist up.

"What have you gotten yourself into?" she spits.

Sirius stops the impulse to hide his hand. The dark mark is black as ink. Voldemort is calling, and Sirius thinks he's been calling for a while.

"Thanks and all, but it's not your damn business." He sits. His rib is healed, he's breathing easily, but there are still black veins all over his abdomen. Now that he's naked, he can see they are all over his arm, too. His chest.

He's still very nauseous and his vision has black smudges at the edges.

"I thought you'd be smarter than that," she says, jaw clenched, still staring daggers at the skull and snake.

"You are aware Regulus has one too, right?" Sirius hisses back. He stands, gingerly. The room spins around him a couple of times before it comes into focus again. He feels weak, unsteady and his side flares with fain, reaching into his chest, up his neck, to the base of his skull.

He grabs his wand, that was left for him on the other nightstand.

"You are not Regulus," she says.

"Oh, I know. You pointed that out often and loudly, my entire life."

Even the small distance to his dresser weakens him further. But he makes it, opens it and-

All his clothes are there. He takes a random shirt and struggles to put it on.

"You need a Healer."

Sirius leaves the room without another word.

So many stairs, winding and-

You're a Black, you can Apparate straight out.

Right. Sirius tries to button up his shirt, but last he wore it he was sixteen. It doesn't fit him anymore, and he simply doesn't have the energy or limb coordination to try to make it work.

He's getting dizzier the more he stands, the pain getting worse.

Kreacher stares at him from a dark corner.

"You broke my Mistress heart when you left," he says. "Half her hair turned white. Ungrateful, bad, bad Master."

If Sirius didn't feel as if he'd topple over, he'd gladly kill the pest.

As it is, he closes his eyes, and allows the dark mark to pull him to Voldemort.

(-)

Sirius finds himself in a place he's never been before. It's not the cabin, and it's not Lestrange Manor, who wouldn't allow Apparation straight inside it.

Not only is he too dizzy and weak to take in his surroundings properly, but the little attention he has is firmly fixed on Voldemort.

Who looks pissed off. A muscle jerks in his jaw and his eyes, redder than ever, are narrowed in irritation.

Angry, but thankfully contained.

After Sirius just saw in Diagon, he's a *tad* afraid of Voldemort, in ways he never was before.

I must be really ill, he thinks, distracted. For Sirius to admit to himself he's afraid... yeah, he's not doing too well.

"Where were you?" His voice is that dangerous level of soft. "You left the hospital almost twenty hours ago."

Oh, great. He has spies at St Mungo's, too.

"I-" Sirius says, but a sharp pain in his side renders him mute.

"You left without getting treatment," Voldemort informs him, as if Sirius isn't aware.

Fucking obnoxious, the way he feels the need to state obvious facts, just to show off that he knows everything.

He takes a step toward Sirius and Sirius, instinctively, tries to step back. Pain flares everywhere. His knees go weak and he flounders, losing his footing. He grabs on a high chair, steadying himself.

When he looks up, there are *two* Voldemort swimming in his vision.

Before he says anything, he's grabbed by the arm. It's very different from when his mother did it. A powerful, indomitable grip. He doesn't try to fight.

"I was *indisposed*; I couldn't answer your call," he hisses. The pain gets worse when he's manhandled on a table. He tries to stand back up, but Voldemort pushes against his chest and Sirius just gives up and lies on it. He's too weak to do anything else.

The tip of that pale, creepy wand touches Sirius's skin, right over where the curse hit. His shirt is opened, impossible to button it.

"Who made this mockery of a healing?" Voldemort snarls.

“It looks like a complicated curse,” he says, unreasonably insulted on behalf of his mother.

“It is. They should have sent you to a Healer. Surely, the Order has some good ones. At the very least, Dumbledore should have seen to you.”

Dumbledore. James. They’re probably looking for Sirius, too.

“I’m fine,” he mumbles, black dots dancing in his vision.

“You are hours away from dying.”

Oh. Not so fine, then.

His side burns, as Voldemort traces patterns on his skin. Vials of potions appear and Voldemort alternates between forcing them down Sirius’ throat and using his wand again.

Sirius feels more and more lightheaded, but the pain doesn’t seem as bad, at least. His body relaxes in that unnatural way, only brought about by magic.

“Where’s Mulciber? I’ve some score to settle-”

Voldemort’s eyes spark, full of anger. “Dead.”

Sirius freezes. Their eyes meet.

“You didn’t imagine, I hope, that I’d let him live. He almost killed you.”

Sirius doesn’t know what to do with this information. His brain malfunctions for a couple of seconds. “How- why *wouldn’t* he try to kill me? He doesn’t know I’m a Death-”

“They were all recently told not to inflict too much damage on your person,” Voldemort says. “As a favour to Bella.”

“It was an accident,” Sirius says, heart thudding. He can feel it in his ears. “He meant to hit James-”

“I do not allow accidents.” Voldemort looks away, back to Sirius’ abdomen.

Bollocks. With Bella in his inner circle, Sirius is certain there must be *plenty* of accidents.

The intense healing, the potions, the pure exhaustion start to claim him. It makes him pleasantly woozy, as if he’s floating.

He saw his mother. It’s only then starting to register, but it’s hard to truly grasp it in that state.

He went home, faced her, and *survived.* He closes his eyes, and he recalls her sitting at his bedside, worried. Like she was long before, when she used to love Sirius and he had dragon pox.

Is it possible I hallucinated the entire thing? The thought makes him unbearably sad all of a sudden. No, it would be crushing to wake up later and find out he was only dreaming.

He struggles to open his eyes. Voldemort is so focused above him, eyes fixed on whatever injury Sirius has sustained.

“I am not hallucinating, am I?” Sirius asks. His speech comes out slurred. His mouth is dry, tongue heavy.

“You aren’t.” His voice is grounding, reassuring. No, Sirius can’t be hallucinating. Even his imagination couldn’t come up with something quite like Voldemort. “You should be asleep after the potions I gave you. But apparently you are quite resistant to any mind-altering substances.” He spares Sirius a glance-

Yeah, I can’t come up with something like this. Voldemort is just- *too much.*

“How are you real?” Sirius asks. How is it possible someone like him exists? Scenes from Dragon Alley flash before Sirius’ eyes. How can one man hold so much power?

And then the memory changes, and he’s back in Grimmauld; with his mother, that takes care of Sirius, watches over him as he sleeps, in a bedroom she kept the way he left it, as if waiting for him to return.

There’s nothing in this world quite like a mother. Even a hateful, scornful mother.

“Have you, under any name, wanted something that you never got?”

“Yes,” Voldemort answers.”

“Tom Riddle was an orphan,” Sirius says, closing his eyes. “He once wanted a family, but he never got it.”

Because that is the only thing a man like him can’t get. He can gain power, wealth, followers, he can conquer the world, but he can’t get his family.

Sirius had been somewhat right- he had seen a similarity between him and Voldemort and while he thought it was because Merope Gaunt was a terrible mother, it was actually the fact that Voldemort must have craved for a family at some point, as much as Sirius does.

Only Sirius left his family. Voldemort’s family left him.

“It’s not all that it’s cracked up to be,” Sirius mumbles, half asleep.

A deep laugh fills the room. It’s very pleasant. It invades Sirius’ brain and he can’t think anymore.

“What a delight you are,” he hears, as if from far away, right before he passes out.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes Sirius a while to wake up. A very gradual, groggy, return to consciousness. Even when he feels certain he's cognisant, he still doesn't open his eyes.

He feels great. Rested. Something that hardly happens to him. And he just knows that once he opens his eyes, all that will vanish as he'll have to deal with reality.

He knows he's somewhere with Voldemort, but he's still in that phase, trapped between dreams and alertness, where his predicament doesn't seem like such a big deal.

He thinks Voldemort is touching him- the sensations on the left side of his abdomen are too soft to be a wand.

That, too, feels good.

Open your eyes.

No. Not yet. Why ruin a good thing? In fact, Sirius thinks he can will himself back to sleep, no problem. Avoid dealing with the utter shit in his life for a little while longer.

Open your eyes! The voice sounds like his father.

Sirius sighs and obeys.

He's staring up at a particularly high ceiling. It snaps into focus immediately, and Sirius only now realises how very ill he'd been before he arrived in that room, how his vision blurred.

"I'll never take sight for granted again," he mumbles.

Poor James.

"You take everything for granted," comes the response, and now Sirius has no other choice but to take his eyes off the ceiling and look down.

Yes, he is touching me. Why? After all, Sirius' injury seems healed. His skin is back to normal.

It's then when he realises he's still under the effect of some potion or another, because he isn't panicked nor disturbed that Voldemort has his fingers on him.

In fact, Sirius suspects he's high as fuck, because he just feels wonderfully.

He's playing with Sirius' tattoo, he realises, after he inspects the situation for a few seconds.

Pale fingers run over Sirius' phoenix. It flaps his wings, or closes them, depending on how it is stroked.

"Bet you hate it," he whispers. Sirius' left arm, with the dark mark, lays awfully close to his side, right next to the phoenix.

"I don't." Voldemort finally stops touching him. "I appreciate Phoenixes. Their intelligence, their grace. Their immortality."

"You should see it when it catches fire," Sirius says. "It looks like my entire torso is ablaze."

"I saw it," Voldemort says, softly.

"Huh. It was getting kinda old." Sirius lifts his head somewhat. Yeah, the tattoo is smaller than usual. Just reborn, then.

Marlene's is more impressive. She wanted a bigger one. Even when at the beginning of a life circle, it paints Marlene from hip to neck, huge wings covering her back and chest.

"You like fire." Voldemort's eyes travel to the dragon on Sirius' other side. Only part of it is visible; most of it is on Sirius' back. It trashes its tail now, up and down Sirius' chest-

Wait. He remembers having a shirt on. One that didn't fit him, true, but there *was* a shirt. It's gone now.

"Why am I so calm?" Sirius enquires, because nothing seems to bother him.

"You should be sleeping," Voldemort comments and Sirius has a flash of memory that he'd been told that already, quite a few times. "But you abuse recreational potions and muggle drugs so much, you've become quite resistant."

"I could sleep," Sirius guesses.

"Close your eyes," Voldemort instructs.

No, his father says in Sirius' head.

There's no danger, Sirius tries to tell his father.

There is.

Sirius doesn't like this fight. He wants to be at peace again.

He turns on his side, and only then he feels the pillow under his neck. He's still on the table, only the table is no longer made of wood. It's firm, but not that firm, pleasant under him.

Once on his side, Sirius sees the trail of blood on the rug.

"My blood?" he asks.

“No. I often bring people here to disembowel them.”

Sirius laughs. What a morbid sense of humour. Well, he *hopes* that it’s a joke.

His hair had fallen on his cheek, parts of it in his mouth. Sirius spits it out, to no success.

He closes his eyes. “Bella?”

“In good health.”

“Good, good,” he mumbles. He jerks his head again, trying to get rid of the hair.

Cold fingers trail on his cheek, pushing the hair back.

“Thanks,” he says, and falls back to sleep.

(-)

Next time he opens his eyes, he sees the high ceiling and instantly remembers everything.

The battle, Bella, his mother, and then Voldemort.

Sirius is on his feet in record time, heart in his throat. *Where the fuck am I? And where is Voldemort?*

He looks around, trying not to panic.

He’s in what appears to be…. a torture chamber, really. A big, mostly empty room, with no windows.

There’s only the table Sirius was sleeping on, transfigured into an impromptu bed, and a high chair beside it.

On the chair, there’s a glass of water and Sirius’ wand.

He grabs it and feels better for it. He drinks the water, too, cold and soothing when it goes down his throat.

There are bloodstains everywhere, and some look far too old to be Sirius’.

“I often bring people here to disembowel them,” Voldemort said and Sirius’ stomach twists.

But then he sees the cauldrons in the far corners, hidden by the shadows of the candles fixed on the wall.

He goes closer to inspect it and he finds shelves filled with potion vials, herbs, and all sorts of illegal and rare ingredients.

Alright, maybe a brewing room that's only occasionally used as a torture chamber.

How is that better?

He shakes his head. Doesn't matter.

He locates the door and heads for it; part of him expects to find it locked.

It isn't. The handle twists under his fingers, and then Sirius finds himself in a forest.

Night. He's confused as to how long had passed since the battle, since he went to Grimmauld.

Fuck. Mum.

Sirius shudders. He's so distraught he Apparates away, without even trying to look at the stars and determine the location he was just in.

(-)

"Why the fuck are you half-naked?" Rabastan asks, after an elf lets Sirius inside Lestrange Manor.

"To bring joy into the hearts of those lucky enough to feast their eyes on me," Sirius snaps. "Where's Bella?"

"Resting."

Sirius heads for the stairs.

Rabastan trails after him.

"Please put on a shirt before you go in. You can have one of mine; I don't think Rod will be happy to learn you are going into her chambers to begin with, let alone naked-"

Sirius ignores him, taking two steps at a time, and then taking a left turn on the second floor.

When he enters Bella's room, he slams the door shut in Rabastan's face.

She's sleeping in her enormous bed.

She looks like a goddess, lovely and *pure.* Her long lashes caress her cheeks, her hair covers the fluffy pillows.

Sirius approaches her, his boots making no noise on the soft carpet.

He takes her hand. She's always so soft, her skin perfect and unblemished.

“Sirius?” she asks, without opening her eyes.

“Mmm.” It’s all he can say, faced with her this way; when he imagines what he almost lost.

“I’m fine. Just need to rest for a couple of days. My lord saw to me right after the battle.”

She tries to pull him into the bed.

“Come, rest with me.”

It is tempting. Bella’s room is much more comfortable than the one he has in his house. It’s grand and beautiful, like his own, only this one holds his *Bella*. It is not cold and empty.

Sirius would like to stay.

“Can’t. Go back to sleep.” He bends and kisses her tenderly. Once on her exquisite full lips, once on the top of her perfect nose, and once on her forehead.

She giggles and lets go of his hand, turns on her side.

(-)

Oh, bugger.

There are people in his house. *That’s it. I’m going to change the wards to not let anyone in, ever again.*

He just wants a moment to himself, to process his mother.

He finds James, Marlene and Dumbledore in his living room.

(-)

She wouldn’t care, he thinks, when he’s finally alone.

It’s all he could think about. He had little patience for Dumbledore, James and Marlene. He knows he was short with them, he feels bad for it.

“I was called,” he’d snapped, when they asked where he was. *“And now I’m tired. So I’ll appreciate it if I can get some rest.”*

Only Sirius is not tired at all. He isn’t sure if it’s because of Voldemort’s potions and healing, but he rather doubts it.

There's an energy inside him that has nothing to do with magic.

She would care, another voice insists, as he stares at the blank parchment.

He's been staring at it for quite some time.

She cared enough to help you.

She cared enough to keep Sirius' room the way he left it.

So, is it absurd to assume she'd want to know if he survived the curse?

Is she in Grimmauld, alone with that insane elf, alone with the ghosts, pacing in the living room, speculating if Sirius is still alive?

He swallows.

Maybe she is. But what if she isn't?

Their paths crossed, once, mere days after he was done with Hogwarts.

She was with Regulus, and they were coming out of Gringotts, as Sirius was climbing to the entrance.

They walked right past each other, and his mother and brother didn't spare him a glance.

Like he didn't exit.

And truly, he felt it so. He felt there was no reason to exist any longer.

There's nothing that hurts quite like shunning. There is no violence in it, but it cuts far worse. It cut inside him, hallowed him out, and he kept bleeding, the wound festering. Invisible, but painful.

After she heard he'd joined the Order, Bella wouldn't look at him, either, not even when he begged her to talk to him, down in Knockturn Alley, when he stalked her to Borgin and Burkes.

Narcissa gave an interview to Witch Weakly, when she allowed journalists in Malfoy Manor to photograph her garden for their 'Top five magical gardens in Britain' article.

'Mrs Malfoy is devoted to her family, which consists of husband Lucius Malfoy, sister Bellatrix Lestrange, cousin Regulus Black and Evan Rosier.'

Sirius went to Andromeda, but she found it too painful to look at him, because he reminded her so much of what she left behind. They sat in silence, only filled by small Nymphadora, and they did not look at each other.

She wouldn't care, Sirius decides, scrunching up the parchment, throwing it across the room.

You didn't look at her either, that day at Gringotts, a voice whispers.

But it's different, isn't it? He didn't acknowledge her, just because she ignored him *first.*

And she had Regulus at her side. They all had each other; it was Sirius that was alone.

He stands, furious and hurt, and heads to his liquor cabinet.

But he's not as damaged as he was. That wound healed a little when he got his Bella back. He could breathe easier.

And the other night, his mother- his mother took care of him.

"Fuck," he growls and returns to the table, summons another parchment.

And then he's back to staring at it.

I can just get out and provoke a scandal in a pub. It's sure to be reported in a gossip magazine, and his mother would know then he's alive.

That is much easier that putting quill to paper.

In the end, he remains seated, and he writes.

'Thank you for your assistance. I appreciate it.

Sirius'

He scrunches up his nose.

Why? It's good. Short and to the point. Cold, polite, the way you were taught.

But then she won't answer back with the customary *'you are welcome'*, and Sirius will get hurt again, will wait for an owl for days on end.

He summons another parchment.

It takes him until dawn to finally send the owl.

In the end, he'd only written *'thanks'*.

It's enough. And Sirius won't be waiting for a reply, because 'thanks' is rude, undeserving of an answer.

It's perfect.

(-)

“Sir is to have these potions, Sir!” One of Bella’s elves tells Sirius, almost giving him a heart attack when he wakes up with the little blighter staring down at him.

She has a tray of vials with her. She stacks them neatly on Sirius’ nightstand.

“Here is instructions.” She places a note beside the flasks. “Mistress Bellatrix said Sir takes them *or else.*”

Sirius grabs the note, and instantly knows that’s not Bella’s writing.

It’s Voldemort’s. Not that he ever saw something written by him, but Sirius just knows.

Plain directions on when to take the potions, according to colour.

“Mistress Bella said I is to make you a meal, sir. What would sir like?”

“Nothing. Go back to Lestrange Manor.”

“But I is ordered to-“

“Leave,” Sirius snaps, and then he regrets it when she flinches.

It’s Kreacher’s fault. Seeing him again reminded Sirius why he hates elves.

“I’m not hungry, it’s fine,” he says, in a gentler tone.

The poor thing trembles, her ears dropped low. “Mistress Bella said I is to feed you, sir. *Or else.*”

Sirius sighs. “Fine. Make me whatever you think best.”

Relieved, the elf disappears.

(-)

“I was particularly-” Sirius pauses, undecided. He’d came to Hogwarts to apologise to Dumbledore, but the words refuse to get out of his mouth. Blacks don’t apologise.

“I was out of sorts,” he ends up uttering, meeting those sharp blue eyes. “I shouldn’t have been so blunt.”

“Please accept a tea,” Dumbledore speaks after a few seconds.

“Alright.”

Just as he says it, the tea pops into existence in front of him.

“I appreciate you coming here today,” Dumbledore says, as Sirius cradles the cup between his hands. “But it isn’t necessary. I can imagine the pressure you are under. There is no need to apologise.”

I wasn’t apologising, exactly.

“Are you recovered? Do you want Poppy to have a look at you?”

“I’m good. I wasn’t- it was nothing. Just a broken rib.”

Dumbledore watches him attentively. “James claimed you were cursed; that it showed on the diagnostic spell the Healer cast on you, but they weren’t sure what it was. There were no symptoms. In my experience, that means a time release curse. Those are some of the worst.” A short silence. “And amongst the most difficult to get rid of.”

Just fucking tell him. It’s nothing to feel guilty about.

“Voldemort fixed it,” he says, glaring into his tea. He should leave it at that, but he feels the need to keep talking, as if he’s done something wrong and has to explain himself. “He noticed how injured I was and he -well. He healed it. Apparently, I was close to kicking it.”

“He always had a talent for healing,” Dumbledore offers, eventually.

What isn’t he talented at?

A long stretch of silence. Sirius feels he’s being watched, but not only by Dumbledore. Being in that office is a double danger, with Phineas there. Whatever judgment Dumbledore sometimes holds in his voice, it’s nothing to the contempt Phineas has for Sirius.

“The portrait,” Sirius says, still looking at his tea, gesturing vaguely to where he knows his great- great-grandfather is. “He won’t be able to tell mother anything, right?”

“No,” Dumbledore says what Sirius already knew in theory. The portraits are constrained by ancient magic to obey the current Headmaster, but-

“Are you sure? He’s a Black.” Loyalty to the family comes first for Blacks. Or it should. Sirius and Andromeda did not abide by that rule. Not completely.

A snort. Dumbledore is not one to snort, so Sirius knows *who* was responsible.

“Even so, he is bound to secrecy.”

But would Phineas tell Dumbledore Sirius went home? For some reason, Sirius wouldn’t want anyone to know he saw his mum. Well, he knows why. It sounds so pathetic that when he felt ill, he’d went home to mummy.

“I was going to visit you soon; I thought to give you a few days to rest, but if you’re well enough-”

“I’m fine.”

“Then I would like to ask you to try to find out about the child the Death Eaters took.”

Sirius totally forgot about that. What kind of person forgets about a kidnapped child?

The bad sort. The selfish sort. Sirius was only focused on Bella, on his mum.

On Voldemort.

He looks up. Dumbledore has a grave look about him.

“Who is she?”

“Her mother is-was- an Unspeakable. There are rumours she discovered some ancient, forgotten magic. And we know Voldemort has spies everywhere in the Ministry.”

Like you don’t, Sirius thinks. Whatever happens in the Department of Mystery shouldn’t reach Voldemort’s ears, but then they shouldn’t reach Dumbledore’s either. That’s strictly the Department’s business. Crouch would be just as pissed off to find Dumbledore interfering, as if he’d be to know Voldemort is.

“She fled the country two weeks ago; I imagine in an effort to keep her discoveries from falling into the wrong hands.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, pushing up his glasses. “But now she is certain to return when she hears her husband was murdered and her child is held hostage. If you are able, I would like to know if she’s in contact with Voldemort already. If she will come to him. It is paramount that we stop her before that happens.”

Sirius takes a sip of his tea. Something inside him calms.

He’s not the only terrible bastard that dismissed the girl so casually.

Dumbledore is more concerned about what the Unspeakable will give to Voldemort in exchange for her daughter’s safety.

“Has anything of note transpired lately?” Dumbledore asks, after a while. “You had nothing to report since confirming Yaxley and Rodolphus are in Voldemort’s inner circle.”

And that was over six weeks ago.

Oh, I found out his birth name, the one you are trying so hard to hide. I also stole a no doubt valuable file from the Ministry and handed it to him. Ah, and I killed Voldemort’s uncle because I freaked out when I violated his mind and found out he was wrongly sentenced to Azkaban for offing Voldemort’s dad.

But none of that is vital information to the Order, is it? It’s not like it would help them fight Voldemort any better.

Sirius shrugs. “If there was something, I’d have told you,” he says, a little too sharply. “So not much to report. Unless you want a step-by-step description of the ‘duels’ he still insists we hold weekly.”

“Rumour is he personally trained only a select few of his inner circle. It is a good sign that he is doing it with you, that he keeps doing it. It means he thinks you worthy. He wouldn’t waste his time and talents on someone he has no interest at all in.”

“Such a delight you are.” Sirius isn’t sure Voldemort actually said that, or he dreamt it, in that state he’s been in, in pain and with Merlin knows how many potions in his blood.

“Great,” Sirius says, some sarcasm seeping in his voice. Voldemort’s interest is flattering, he can’t deny it, but it is also uncomfortable and risky.

Dumbledore raises an eyebrow.

“It’s just strange; you were always warning me off using dark magic and now suddenly it’s a good thing I’m practicing it with Voldemort.”

Dumbledore leans back in his chair, hand clasped over each other on his lap.

“Let us be frank.”

Sirius hates those words. An insult is sure to follow them.

“You were exposed to dark magic before you even stepped foot into this castle. Knowing the Arts doesn’t make someone a dark wizard or evil by default. I know them- not like Voldemort, of course, since I have the theory but lack the practice. But I have more knowledge of it than I would comfortably admit to in public. Aurors know that branch of magic and are sometimes forced to use it.”

He considers Sirius for a second.

“Your family is quite famous for it. That doesn’t mean all Blacks are dark wizards or they’ll go on a dark magic fuelled rampage. Phineas,” Dumbledore raises his chin to indicate the portrait as if Sirius needs a visual, as if he doesn’t know who Phineas is and might confuse him for another Headmaster. “Was quite accomplished with it and yet he was an upstanding member of society, for the most part, and a credit to this school. He was a tad eccentric, is true-”

“Like you aren’t,” Sirius and Phineas say at the same time, making Dumbledore smile, lightly.

“The trick is to not get lost in it. And it is hard not to. That is the reason it is prohibited. Power is addictive. Dark Magic most of the times requires hatred or a wish to inflict harm. There are very few people that manage to just learn it, without eventually crossing that line. It feeds on despair and pain and anger, Sirius. It is a loop. The power is an illusion. You think you grow stronger, and you might, magically, but inside you’re growing weaker. Dark magic consumes the user.”

Dumbledore meets his eyes.

“Dark magic destroys, by definition. The caster and those around him.”

If this is supposed to sound repulsive to a twenty-year-old man, Dumbledore is far too old to remember what boys want in their youth.

He almost makes it sound appealing.

Or maybe it's Sirius at fault here, and most other boys his age wouldn't find the dangerous side of the Arts as fascinating.

Dumbledore stops to consider his words, which is a rarity. He never needs breaks to collect his thoughts.

"You are reckless. You are impulsive. But I try to believe that you are not as susceptible to become devoted to dark magic. You know it already; you were born and raised around it. You witnessed what it can do to a family-"

"Stop," Sirius snarls.

Dumbledore doesn't, but he grows more cautious.

"You are not as in awe of it as some other young, angry boys that are just now discovering it might be, is what I want to say. It is not a novelty for you that would quickly escalate into an obsession. You are not the studious type, to hunt down dangerous texts just so you can learn more. You had those books in your childhood home. You've resisted it, more or less, for years."

"Oh, my. A compliment."

"I have many compliments for you, Sirius, but you do not like to hear them. It's almost as if you prefer insults rather than kind words."

Sirius wrinkles his nose, but doesn't know what to say.

"Your father was my student, as was your grandfather. Your great- grandfather, too. *I* was Phineas' student."

By Merlin, this man is ancient. Sirius forgets it sometimes, just how old he is.

"Our society, as we know, has conflicting opinions about the Blacks in many ways. There are conversations to be had about morality and responsibility, about corruption. But," he adds, just as Sirius feels a muscle in his jaw twitch. "No one can deny your family's strength. You come from a very long line of powerful men. Your father could reduce a room to silence just with one glare. Some men in the Wizengamot would stutter in his presence." He holds Sirius' gaze. "You were raised by Orion. It will not be easy for Voldemort to impress you with his remarkable power."

Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that.

Is it possible Dumbledore doesn't know Voldemort as well as he claims? He says Voldemort has remarkable power, but has he ever *truly* witnessed it? It is, after all, unlikely Voldemort would have let loose in Hogwarts' classrooms.

Being raised by the Blacks, by his powerful father, is what makes Voldemort's magic so *inconceivable* to Sirius. As Dumbledore noted, Sirius was surrounded by greatness since birth, and yet his mind still struggles to accept someone like Voldemort exists.

"You have been in his company for many months now and I don't see that shine, that mad worship in your eyes that I sadly saw in others that were subjected to his influence. I believe your pride might save you from the fate many have suffered. You are unlikely to crumble at his feet and do his bidding blindly."

Well, that, at least, is true. Sirius won't ever be eager to serve and bow to anyone.

"But your pride can also mean your death. Eventually, if you don't fall for his tricks and what he offers, if he realises he cannot charm you into obedience -he will kill you."

Sirius is fucked either way.

"Let us hope we can bring him down before that happens," the Professor says, in a grave tone.

People, including Sirius, often complain Dumbledore is secretive, that he speaks in riddles.

But a candid Dumbledore is more intimidating than his usual self.

(-)

"What happened to that kid?" Sirius asks, bluntly. Subtle does not work with Voldemort. He'd see right through it. "The one your Death Eaters took from Diagon. I wasn't aware your *esteemed* organisation is in the habit of hunting little kids."

Voldemort gives him an amused look. "The girl is safe; she isn't hurt. Undoubtably frightened, but discomfort is a part of life. She'll get over it."

"Why do you want her?"

A smile. "I am sure Dumbledore filled you in; you wouldn't be asking me about a little half-blood, so beneath your notice, if he hadn't put you up to it."

Well, I tried.

"And if her mother refuses to give in? Will the girl be killed?"

"Why waste magical blood?" Voldemort counters.

Sirius frowns. "Because if you don't deliver on your threats, people won't-"

“I’ll give her to Fenrir. If the Unspeakable refuses to cooperate and stays hidden, she’s hardly in any position to look after the girl, no? Her father is dead. The child will find a new family in Fenrir’s pack.”

Sirius struggles to keep any feeling off his face. He’s probably unsuccessful, because Voldemort’s smile only widens.

“As it is, it won’t come to that. You may inform Dumbledore the Unspeakable is *already* in my care. His efforts failed, as usual.”

Voldemort looks awfully pleased with himself. He’s leaning on a tall willow, arms crossed over his chest. In theory, this is their Tuesday duelling meeting, only they’ve stopped dueling for at least half an hour.

They’re just standing there. *Talking.* Sirius is at his fourth cigarette, because he doesn’t know what to do with his hands if he’s not holding a wand. He was never one to feel awkward in any social situations- and he’s not feeling awkward now, exactly.

It’s just that he’s being observed so meticulously by those creepy eyes, that he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He’s in an empty clearing, there’s no chair, nothing to mess around with, nothing to focus on but *Voldemort.*

So he smokes. He wonders if he can leave. Voldemort likes to pretend Sirius has choices here, and Sirius likes to pretend that’s the case, too.

The duel is clearly over; it is very late, so late it’s almost early. He thinks the sun will rise soon. *I can say I’m tired and fuck off.*

He says no such thing, of course. He wants to continue to pretend he can leave whenever he wants, and that will be ruined if he says he wants to go and Voldemort says ‘no’.

“I wonder…” Voldemort tilts his head to the side in that way he sometimes does. “You seem concerned about the girl. Did it occur to you that have I not gotten to the Unspeakable already, Dumbledore would have done his best to keep her hidden? Even if it meant the child would be punished for it?”

“It did cross my mind, yes.”

“Hard not to, I imagine. He sent you to me with very little regard for your well being, after all. Dumbledore will always sacrifice individuals, if he deems it necessary.”

Sirius snorts. “So? You want me to believe you won’t, or what? That you care for your Death Eaters or little girls-”

“Of course I’d sacrifice almost everyone to get what I want. But I don’t claim I’m a bastion of morality.”

“Neither does Dumbledore. Other people claim he’s a bastion of morality. He never does. He’s quick to own his flaws.”

Voldemort looks a tad displeased upon hearing it. It satisfies Sirius.

You think you can easily turn me against Dumbledore by pointing out he's as human as the rest of us?

In any case, it's not like Dumbledore would give a child to werewolves or send Sirius to potential death just to have a laugh. He's put in the position to make these hard choices as a result of Voldemort's actions.

"I'm not that concerned about the girl's safety." Of course, he'd rather no child suffer, but he's not a naive idiot. There's a war out there. He didn't start it, he'd like for it to end, but the kid means nothing to him, just a general discomfort that he assumes anyone would feel knowing innocents are in danger. "Or my own, for that matter. If I were, I wouldn't be here," Sirius says.

"Of course," Voldemort agrees, but he's still ticked off. He walks towards Sirius and-

Blacks show no fear. Sirius lights another fag.

"Rodolphus told me you refuse to participate in one of their events." Voldemort stops rather close. Sirius resists the childish urge to blow smoke in his face.

"Oh, did poor Rody complain to you?" Sirius snaps.

He shouldn't have given lip to Voldemort, nor defend Dumbledore. This is the punishment, he's certain.

Rodolphus wants Sirius to hunt muggles for sport. He didn't say it in as many words, but the 'a little get together', 'just a bit of fun', 'we will be masked, of course'- all clues that immediately confirmed to Sirius that it would not be something he would want to take part of.

So he said no. One time, two times, three times-

But if Voldemort himself orders it…

"I don't see the purpose," Sirius says, taking care to keep his voice level and drop the mocking attitude from before. "Torturing or killing random muggles won't advance the—your *cause*- the war. It's mindless violence and I have no interest in it."

"Some do. A small fraction of my Death Eaters are interested in mindless violence."

"Well, they can have at it. I'm not gonna stop them."

Sadly, no one can. Well, Voldemort could, but it's Voldemort that promised them free rein to commit these atrocities.

"It has a purpose," Voldemort says, eyes firmly focused on Sirius' face.

“Does it? Cleansing the world of filth, is it? There are a few billion muggles, killing a couple now and then won’t-“

“As I said, it keeps some Death Eaters entertained. It gives them a sense of the power I promised them. But that’s not why you are invited. That’s not why every new Death Eater has to take part in one of these affairs. You will go.”

Sirius’ jaw clenches. His stomach rolls. He sees Morfin, suffocating.

Parkinson’s head detaching from his body.

He feels nauseous.

I don’t want to go? Sounds childish. And it would be for nothing.

“Just once,” Voldemort says, and he sounds *reassuring,* the bastard. “You have my word that you will not be invited again after this one.”

“Did Regulus- was he-“ Sirius spits through his teeth.

“He was too young when he took the mark. And since we’ve made a deal that he won’t be involved as long as you obey me, he won’t get invited.”

That wasn’t the deal. The deal was that Voldemort will leave Regulus alone if Sirius kills Parkinson.

But what can he do about it, when Voldemort can make new deals, all the time?

Sirius is perfectly aware Regulus will forever be held over his head.

“It is long overdue. We had a few recruits over the past months, but Rodolphus waited for this… shall we call it… initiation, so you can join them,” Voldemort says and now he’s amused again, brief anger forgotten. “I am told you know one of the new boys.”

Sirius does not like that at all.

(-)

“You alright, Sirius?”

Lily sits on his leg, starling him. He was so lost in his head, the party around him surprises him, when he blinks back into the present.

“Yeah, love. Why?”

She shrugs. “You look distracted. Quiet.”

“Oh, come on. I’ve been quiet before!”

She smiles, a devious little thing that wouldn’t go amiss on a Slytherin.

“Only when you’ve done something bad, or you plan to do something bad.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re lucky you’re James’ girl, otherwise I wouldn’t put up with you.”

She throws her hair over her shoulder, smacking Sirius in the face with it in the process. “Where’s Marlene?”

“Why is everyone asking me about McKinnon, I’m not her damn keeper-“

“You fought again?”

“No.” Sirius sighs. “She’s working.”

Lily smiles. “You should bring her to lunch on Sunday.”

Sirius pokes her in the ribs. “Really? You want to do that cute couple stuff? Firstly, we aren’t together, and secondly, you can’t even stand her.”

Marlene and Lily can only tolerate each other when in Order meetings or when drunk.

“Who does, really?” Lily makes a face. “But she’s with you now, so I’ll try to get along with her.”

Sirius feels something akin to panic. He doesn’t want to do lunches with Lily, James and Marlene. He doesn’t want whatever he has with Marlene to get serious to the extent Lily would offer to suffer *‘that bitter bitch’* just for his sake.

“I’ll pass.”

Lily sighs, standing up.

“You’re the only man that wouldn’t freak out when your wife sits in Black’s lap,” Franks tells James, a little further away.

James laughs, winking at Sirius. “Of course not. But, Lily love, do make sure to shake yourself thoroughly; he has fleas.”

Sirius sticks out his tongue at him, but then he settles more comfortably in the armchair and retreats back into his head.

(-)

“You’re a persistent fucker, I’ll give you that,” Sirius says, when he opens his door to find Lucius standing on the other side.

He ignored three letters, inviting him to Malfoy Manor in the past month. He hadn’t meant to, exactly. It’s just that he always forgets to set an appointment, and when he remembers, there are about fifty things he’d rather be doing that having a chat with Lucius.

He had seen Lucius a couple of times since the letters started; at a meeting with Voldemort, and once at dinner with Bella, but Lucius only made polite conversation in those occasions, so Sirius imagined it was not anything of consequence.

“What is it?” Sirius asks, eyes narrowed. “About my seat? Something else going on in the Wizengamot? I dearly hope not, because I’m done with that shit for the foreseeable future.”

Even more letters come from those stuffy, old buggers. Sirius doesn’t even open them. He thinks Marlene used some to make funny animal shapes.

Lucius doesn’t answer, stands there in his doorway with those inscrutable eyes of his.

“Or is it about gold? You want money from me?” From what Sirius understands after some of Bella’s remarks, Lucius is in charge of gathering gold for the cause, harassing rich Death Eaters about it. “I don’t have money, and we are not talking about the Black vault.”

Still nothing.

Sirius is deciding between slamming the door in his face or inviting him in, when Lucius takes out a parchment from the inner pocket of his ornate robe.

He hands it to Sirius without a word.

It looks like nothing Sirius would expect from a Malfoy. Terrible penmanship, crappy parchment; a sort of schedule.

Loads of spelling errors, between times and dates-

“What is-“ he starts to ask, before his eyes fall on his name.

Sirius Black. It’s in a square, beside a date. *‘Ministry inspection.’*

It’s a page from the Azkaban registry.

Sirius looks up to meet Lucius’ icy gaze.

Nothing stays secret in their small world.

“You owe me,” Lucius drawls.

Sirius tries to think. “Owe you what, exactly?”

A blond, raised eyebrow greets him.

“Wizengamot members don’t do surprise inspections without approval from the Minister. Even if we would, you’d be the last person to voluntary take interest in the way our justice system works. And what a coincidence, Morfin Gaunt drops dead on that very same day.”

Shit.

“Piss off, Lucius. Go ahead and tell them. What are they gonna do? Give me a fine for going to Azkaban without authorisation?”

“They’d do nothing, cowards that they are. Crouch would give you a stern warning and that would be that.”

“See, I don’t owe you shit-”

“However, *someone else* might not be so…” Lucius pretends search around for a word. “Lenient.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sirius tries to hide behind his annoyance to hide the panic. “Why would *someone else* mind me visiting-”

“It’s not the visiting part that he’d take issues with.”

“That is all there was to it,” Sirius growls. “What are you saying? I had nothing to do with Gaunt’s death, for fuck's sake, that’s ridiculous.”

“I doubt you had anything to do with it. But see… *he* might take offence to anyone looking into Morfin Gaunt. He, too, would immediately know you weren’t there to inspect Azkaban. *Absurd.* Only brain dead guards would buy that excuse. You were there to see Gaunt. You found him dead, but that’s why you went. There’s no other reason for it. You had no business there.”

“Yeah?” Sirius gets in his face. He’s just a little taller than Lucius and it gives Sirius great pleasure. “And why would I look into Morfin Gaunt, Lucius? After all, he was no one of importance.”

Lucius calmly stands his ground. “You like to play the fool, but you’re smart. Too smart. We both know very well who Morfin Gaunt was. That is the reason you went to speak to him.”

“We know,” Sirius accepts. “But does *he* know we know? After all, if he’d be displeased I looked up Morfin Gaunt, then I guess he’d be equally displeased *you* know why Morfin Gaunt was important.”

Something flickers in Lucius’ eyes. It’s gone fast, but it was there.

“It would mean you, too, got curious about things that you shouldn’t get curious about.”

Lucius smiles. It looks a bit forced. “Do you think I’m an idiot? I wouldn’t hand him the copy of the parchment you are holding. I would just bring it up in conversation at a meeting. I’d tell Bella how overjoyed I am that you are taking interest in our institutions, enough to visit Azkaban. I’d say ‘and how lucky we are he did, because he was the one to discover

Morfin's body and alert the guards. If he hadn't, who knows how long it would have taken those incompetent fools to find the corpse. As it was, Sirius did, and now we have a new sacred family that will vote with us in the Wizengamot."

Fuck. Voldemort would instantly know Sirius was there for Morfin, but unlike Lucius, he wouldn't just *assume* Sirius didn't kill him.

He told Sirius in no uncertain terms to stop looking into his past.

"You owe me," Lucius says, again, and now the smile looks more natural.

"Isn't this treason?" Sirius barks. "Keeping information from him?"

"Only if he learns about it."

Sirius snorts. "What do you want?"

"A bit of gratitude wouldn't go amiss. You're lucky I went and checked the registry. You're lucky it wasn't Rodolphus."

"How would Rodolphus know that *name*? How would Bella, for that matter? I assume your daddy told you, but who would tell them?"

"Who told *you*?" Lucius asks, eyebrow raised.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "It wasn't that hard to learn it, but I sincerely doubt Bella and Rodolphus would dare to investigate it. They're in love with him."

Lucius nods. "They wouldn't. Your father told Rodolphus. And, actually, Orion told me, too. My father wouldn't have. He's too... prudent."

Sirius swallows, instantly jealous. *Hurt.* His father, having these conversations with Rodolphus and Lucius and never with Sirius.

It must be so obvious on his face, because Lucius softens. "He only told us when there were rumours going around in our circles that we took the mark. He told us to discourage us, to put us off. That's all. He'd have no reason to speak to you about it. He'd have only placed you in danger. That's a sure way to get killed, knowing that name. And back then, at your age? Come on, you'd have blurted it out in Hogwarts' Great Hall."

Sirius is still upset. And he resents Lucius for having seen Sirius hurt and insecure. "Voldemort knows I know his name," he spits, furious. "I stole his criminal record from the Ministry and I threw the envelope in his face, with Tom Marvolo Riddle written in big, bold letters on it."

There. That's better. It's Lucius' turn to look astonished. He doesn't show surprise as others would, but just that twitch in his left eye is the equivalent of another man yelling 'no way!'

"You daft idiot," Lucius whispers.

“At least I’m not a coward,” Sirius sneers. “I’m not afraid of him.”

Lucius steps away. “You’re going to get yourself killed, Sirius. It will break Narcissa’s heart.”

“Narcissa has no heart,” Sirius spits and slams the door shut.

Why did you have to insult poor Cissa for? Sirius’ brain demands, but the rest of him is still pissed off about his father.

He tries to admit that what Lucius said was correct. His father had no reason to try to discourage Sirius from following Voldemort around. Sirius did not have any such desires. And even if he would have, he wouldn’t have been put off by the fact he’s a half blood, like Lucius and Rodolphus would have.

Except they *aren’t.*

His father must have been so frustrated.

Sirius imagines it, all those things that he was too young to notice. How much his father must have tried to keep the young men from the sacred families from going to Voldemort. He wouldn’t have been loud, like Parkinson. He would have tried to be discrete.

So he wouldn’t outright antagonise Voldemort.

Impossible. Sirius can’t accept that his father would have been scared of anyone’s wrath, even Voldemort’s.

He had to watch his cousins and friends and all these kids he saw growing up flocking to Voldemort and he was impotent to stop it. And then as soon as he fell ill, one of his sons joined up, and the other ran to Dumbledore.

And now I’m a Death Eater, too.

‘Your father would roll over in his grave’ Parkison said, right before Sirius killed him, one of the few men his father had trusted.

His father didn’t hold Dumbledore in any regard, but at least he could fight Dumbledore in the Wizengamot; the Sacred Families kept Dumbledore at bay from any real power for a long time.

While the old professor is a threat to the old pureblood way of living, he is nowhere near the threat that Voldemort is.

Dumbledore didn’t get any purebloods killed.

Sirius hates that he was too young to be of any help to his father; not only that, but he was a cause of stress, too. While Sirius’ behaviour wasn’t as bad when his father was still well, he wasn’t the perfect heir he should have been. He wasn’t a comfort to his father, just another thing to be worried about.

It hurts tremendously that he wasn't old enough to have the kind of talks with his father that Rodolphus had.

It hurts that he lost him, and it will never stop hurting.

Sirius does not like being in pain. He'd rather be in a rage.

He picks up the keys to his bike and goes out looking for trouble.

(-)

"Sirius!"

He turns on his side and puts a pillow over his head. "Go away," he hisses.

"Sirius, wake up!" Marlene takes away his pillow. There's something off in her voice and Sirius is instantly alert. He stands, grabbing his wand from the nightstand, looking around in alarm.

"What?" he asks, heart beating a mile a minute. Marlene is clad in one of his shirts and not much else. She has an odd expression on her sleepy face, but she doesn't seem scared.

"Your brother is here."

"Good one," Sirius snorts. "What's going on?"

"Your brother is *here*," she insists. "Downstairs. He kept knocking and you wouldn't get up- I was sleepy, alright? I'm still half drunk so I went downstairs, and I peeked through the window and I thought it was *you*! That you somehow left and- I don't know! It's not my fault! You incestuous little shits all look the same, I swear. I opened the door, and by then it was too late. And I was wearing this!" she says, and she shows him the Padfoot collar James gave him as a laugh. Sirius has a vague recollection of putting it on her the other night while they were having sex. "You fucking arsehole!"

Sirius shakes his head. One, twice. *Yes, I'm awake.*

"Regulus?" he asks, dumbly.

Marlene gives him an exasperated look, but she doesn't say something sarcastic like 'how many other brothers do you have'. She speaks softly. "Yes, Sirius. Regulus is downstairs."

(-)

Regulus, like Narcissa and Andromeda, took the 'do not show emotion' thing to heart. He mastered the blank expression by the time he was nine.

But when Sirius steps into his living room, Regulus' face slips into a smile. Wide, joyful and youthful.

Alright, so he's not in trouble. Because that's what Sirius thought when he realised Marlene wasn't joking. That something awful must have happened to bring Regulus to his house. That he's in trouble with the law or with Death Eaters or that their mum died, that maybe Sirius going home gave her a stroke or something.

Regulus was never one for touching, shying away from their mother kisses in public, refusing to hold Sirius' hand when they went to Diagon for his wand, all the while seeking their father's approval. Only their father was too busy trying to control Sirius to notice how perfect his other son was behaving.

Yet now he's in Sirius' space in the blink of an eye, his arms go around him and-

Sirius can't remember when was the last time they hugged.

"Kreacher told me you've been home," Regulus says, still hugging Sirius. "And then I nagged mum until she told me about… *you know.*"

About the mark.

Of course.

Sirius sighs, half disappointed this is what it is about, but alas, even knowing the reason, he hugs Regulus back.

He never thought he'd get to do this again. He grips him tighter; he doesn't want to let him go. His little brother.

When drunk, when incredibly hurt that Regulus wouldn't even look his way at school, Sirius would say, loudly, that James is his brother.

James is *like* a brother- he's Sirius' best mate, his partner in crime, his better half. He can communicate with James just with a glance, something he could never do with Regulus. Sirius wouldn't know how to exist without James.

But he is not Sirius' brother, and he never will be.

Sirius hated Regulus with an unrivalled passion when he was born, when his mother had to divide her attention between them. Sirius remembers *suffering*; even if he was so small, he remembers the fierce jealousy he felt whenever his mum would set Sirius aside, to take Regulus in her arms, to feed him, to comfort him when he cried. How he hated it when Regulus grew bigger and wanted to grab Sirius' toys.

"You have to share," she'd say, and he loathed it. He did not want to share. Not his toys, and not *her.*

He's told he tried to suffocate Regulus with a pillow, shortly after he was born, that his mother found him just in time. Sirius can't remember that, but he remembers vaguely that he wasn't allowed around Regulus unsupervised for a while.

"No," Sirius yells, and it's scary to scream at father, but he just can't help himself when his father comes home from work and takes the baby in his arms. "No! Put him down! He already took mama, I won't let him take you from me, too!"

"Sirius!" His mother snaps, but father is home, so Sirius doesn't care about her anymore. If she can ignore Sirius to look after the baby, Sirius can ignore her, too, and focus on his father.

His father laughs, but he doesn't let go of the baby. Instead, he gestures for Sirius to come closer; he helps Sirius climb in his lap.

"Don't laugh, Orion!" Mother says. "You refuse to understand how badly he's acting. He's on a hunger strike now, he won't eat if I don't personally spoon feed him. Regulus was trying to take his first step today and Sirius shoved him-"

Father doesn't pay her any mind, either. He tells Sirius to hold out his arms, instructs him how to do it, and places the baby there.

"I don't like him," Sirius says, but he feels better already, there in his father's lap, with that solid chest at his back.

Strong arms are under Sirius' own, supporting the baby. "He cries and drools all the time." And now he's crawling all over the house, biting Sirius' toys.

"He's very little. It won't be so forever. He'll grow. You just have to be patient."

The baby isn't crying right then. He stares up at Sirius.

"He has my eyes," Sirius complains. "He stole my eyes, too."

"He has our eyes," his father's voice says, right in Sirius' ear. "Because he is a Black."

Bella, Andy and Cissy are Blacks. They're nice and they smell good. Though Sirius is upset with Andy and Cissy, because they coo over the stupid baby and call him cute. They like to hold him.

Bella doesn't. Bella tells Sirius that the baby is a changeling, a fake baby, and that she only loves Sirius. She doesn't even look at the baby, and she never lets go of Sirius' hand when they are visiting.

"Father, can't we give the baby to Uncle Cygnus? He wants a boy. And he can give us Bella in return."

"We aren't giving Regulus away, Sirius," his father says. "You're my heir."

Sirius knows. He knows he's the heir. It's very important. He's not sure what it means, but he's told about it often.

"And he is your heir. You have to take care of him, the way I take care of you. One day, when I will be gone, when your mother will be gone, it will be just the two of you. You'll only have each other. He's ours, Sirius. A little piece of me, a little piece of your mother, and a little piece of you. Will you promise to care for him? Can I count on you?"

Regulus starts to fuss, but Sirius holds him close for a bit longer.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks, right in Sirius' ear.

"I'm not alone," Sirius warns, quietly.

"I know. McKinnon let me in," Regulus whispers.

And Marlene can't know his little brother is marked. Sirius trusts her with his mark, to keep his secrets, but Regulus… no.

Sirius lets him go. Regulus had time to subdue his face into a neutral expression.

"It's noon," his brother says. "Why are you sleeping at noon?"

"Welcome to adulthood." Sirius pats him on the back. He'd like to hug Regulus again, but that's too much affection for his brother to handle in five minutes. "You can wake up anytime you want."

"Not at home," he mutters.

Breakfast at Grimmauld is served at eight AM, during weekdays. Nine, on weekends.

And it's *mandatory.*

"You're the man of the house now," Sirius says, though he doesn't like saying it. "You can change the schedule."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Not worth the trouble."

Unlike Sirius, Regulus knew when to pick his fights with their mother.

"I didn't expect this," he looks around Sirius' expensively furnished living room. "Mum was sure you'd live in a muggle, dirty flat, with just a mattress on the floor, and I must say, I agreed." He moves closer to the fireplace and picks up the most extravagant looking vase he sees. "It's nice. I like it. Do you have a house-elf? It's suspiciously clean."

"I don't." Bella's still come around when Sirius is asleep or away.

"Good. You shouldn't get one, you'd treat it badly, the poor thing."

"Oh, piss off." Sirius makes a face. He doesn't treat elves badly; just Kreacher.

But Kreacher is not an elf. He's a *demon.*

"Is the rest of the house in an equally good condition?"

How subtle. "You want a tour? We can't. We might find Marlene naked somewhere upstairs."

A flush spreads over Regulus' cheeks. But even that's subdued, just a delicate, faint pink.

"She wasn't much dressed when she opened the door," he mumbles, but doesn't ask for a house tour again.

Regulus sits, uninvited. *Bad form, brother. Where are your manners?*

He looks at Sirius defiantly, but he also looks unsure, sitting stiffly at the edge of the couch.

Blacks don't look insecure, Sirius almost tells him. *If you sat, lounge on it. Make it look like you belong there. Blacks take up space, they don't sit timidly.* But that's Regulus, trapped between the perfect, cold heir and a shy boy.

He'd always been shy; their parents did their best to shake it out of him, and they mostly managed, but not entirely.

"So Witch Weekly got it right? You're engaged to McKinnon?"

Sirius chokes on his own spit. He coughs violently. *"What?"*

Regulus shrugs. "That's what they said. Bella froths at the mouth if someone mentions McKinnon; she's green with jealousy."

Sirius gets his coughing under control. He drops on an armchair, regaining his breath.

He knows Bella is no fan of Marlene; she's amused to read or hear about Sirius' many escapades, she even laughs when Sirius tells her about his muggle wiccans. But not Marlene.

"Mum ended her subscription to Witch Weekly as soon as you stepped out of Hogwarts and they started publishing pictures with you and all those…. agh… ladies."

Sirius cheers up at that. His mother cherished Witch Weekly. Many times when Sirius was trying to talk to her, she'd shoo him away, nose buried in the gossip magazine.

And now she doesn't have it anymore. It feels like a victory.

"I'm not engaged. Merlin!"

"But you live with her. Without being married," Regulus looks half horrified, half excited.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "I don't live with her. She just spends the night sometimes. It's nothing serious."

Of course, Marlene has to ruin that by coming inside the living room some seconds later.

She'd been wearing one of Sirius' shirts when she greeted Regulus- despite what his brother says, Sirius' shirts cover her *enough.*

Unlike what she has on now. A stripe of leather tightly wrapped around her small breasts, leaving her collarbones and her entire midsection uncovered.

And another stripe of leather, one that she calls a skirt, that barely covers her arse.

Regulus's eyes go wide; he looks away hastily.

Marlene smirks.

"I'm off. Do you boys wants some lunch? I have time to whip up something."

She's going through a domestic phase, insisting she cooks. She's terrible at it. Not as bad as James, but close.

"I know he's a bit of a prick, McKinnon, but I won't let you poison my brother."

She hits him over the head.

"Fine. See you around, little Black."

"Good day," Regulus mumbles, still looking everywhere but at her.

(-)

"I'm a Death Eater, too!" Regulus exclaims, as soon as she's out the door. He looks so proud of it, it's revolting.

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me? No one told me-"

"Few are aware." He grits his teeth. "I'm spying on Dumbledore, so keep it under wraps."

"I can't even tell Barty? He's very discrete, as you can imagine."

Sirius' blood freezes. Barty. Crouch' son. Crouch's son is a Death Eater. *Fuck. Fuck, this is so bad.* He desperately wishes Regulus wouldn't have said it.

He struggles to keep his face blank. "Don't talk about it. With anyone."

"How long?" Regulus looks more comfortable now on the couch.

"Half a year, give or take."

A smirk. “I got it last year.”

“Finally first at something. Congratulation,” Sirius seers, full of venom.

Gods, why do you have to be such an arse?

But Regulus is used to Sirius’ cruel remarks; he had to suffer them throughout their childhood, so he takes no offence.

“I only met him once,” Regulus whispers, and his eyes shine.

Sirius had never seen his little brother look so passionate. Not cold, polite, distant Regulus.

It’s disturbing.

He has the same fervour in his eyes that all the other Death Eaters have, and it pisses Sirius off.

“When I got the mark. He said we’ll speak more, after I was done with Hogwarts.” He bites his lip. “I’ve been out of school for almost a month, though, and he didn’t call me.”

Sirius breathes in. He doesn’t know how to handle this.

“But you must see him loads, no?” Regulus enquires. “I knew it, *I knew it!* When I met him, when we talked, I kept thinking how much you’d like him. I knew that if there was a chance, if you’d just agree to see him once, he’ll get your respect. He’s so…” Regulus looks in love, really. Obsessed. He already had a shrine dedicated to Voldemort in his room, even before Sirius left the house. But only *after* his father fell unconscious. As Sirius was busy with his grief, as their mother was busy with scorn, in the immense absence their father left behind, Regulus became even quieter than he used to be, and he started collecting newspaper clippings and glueing them to his wall.

Sirius put up posters of naked girls, and his brother put up pictures of dark marks floating over houses.

To this day Sirius can’t decide which of their rooms their mother hated more.

“Well, you know how he is,” Regulus concludes when he fails to find any adjective to describe Voldemort. “He is a bit like father, no?”

“What?” Sirius spits, outraged by the notion. “No. No, he’s not! He’s nothing like father.”

“He’s-”

“Did you take your N.E.W.Ts?” Sirius blurts out, eager to change the subject.

Regulus gives him a *look*. “Did I take my N.E.W.Ts? Of course I did.”

“I mean, did you get the results yet?” Sirius corrects himself.

“No. Should come soon, I think.”

“Right, right. I’m sure you did well.”

“I’m not concerned,” Regulus drawls, all smug. “I won the Quidditch Cup, too. *Again.”*

“You only won it last time because I couldn’t make myself blast you off your broom,” Sirius mutters.

It was hard, after all, to aim a Bludger at his brother, since Sirius was doing his best not to look at him. James was very upset with Sirius. He still drones on about it when he gets drunk.

“The last match was against Ravenclaw. Gryffindor didn’t even make it to the finals.” Regulus smirks, satisfied. “I caught the snitch in twenty minutes.”

The Gryffindor team must be in shambles without James.

“You should play professionally,” Sirius suggests, mostly mockingly. He’d love for his brother to join a Quidditch team; he can’t be of any use to Voldemort that way. But, of course-

“Mother would kill me.” Regulus glares at him. “If you’d stayed and took care of business, I could have played Quidditch. No one would care what I’d do, then.”

Sirius snorts. “Regulus, you could have been the ninth son, and eight of us could be working in the Ministry and looking over our affairs and you’d still be expected to contribute.”

Regulus sighs. “Why don’t you come home? I don’t get it; you are with *us*, you took your seat in the Wizengamot, so-”

“I told you, I’m spying on Dumbledore. He thinks I’m on his side. Going back home would-”

“Well, you could tell him that it’s a cover, that you need us to think you’re-”

“Regulus. I *can’t*.” This is his brother, after all. He knows Sirius leaving had nothing to do with the war.

“But you saw mum, Kreacher said you didn’t even fight or anything.”

Kreacher and their mother clearly didn’t tell Regulus what state Sirius was in when he entered Grimmauld.

“Why did you-”

“I was drunk.”

Regulus’ jaw drops. “You went home drunk? And you didn’t fight? That’s… unbelievable, to put it mildly.”

“I caught her in a charitable mood. She’s in one of those about once every two years, so you can schedule an appointment for Yule in 1982, and I’ll be there.”

Sirius is certain he won’t survive two more years, so it’s safe to promise it.

Regulus glares at him. “The wards won’t accept me as the new owner. I can’t power them. They’re getting weaker every day.”

Fuck.

“Father’s office door won’t open for me- because I guess now it’s your office. All our papers are there, we need to make order-”

“We’ll solve it. Eventually.” How, Sirius isn’t sure. Maybe he can go when he knows his mother won’t be home.

But even so, even without her there- Sirius is not only avoiding her, but the memory of his father, that’s ingrained into every stone in that house.

Regulus drops the subject. They spend some more minutes in either silence or stilted conversation, before he stands.

“I better be on my way.” He bites his lip in an unguarded gesture. “Is it alright if I visit, once in a while?” And he sounds so young then, shy and *innocent* as he’d been before their father fell ill.

Sirius stands, too. “Of course,” he says. “Of course. You’re always welcome here.”

Regulus smiles.

(-)

“This is the third time Remus doesn’t show up,” James says, huddled close to Sirius. “And the last full moon he blew us all off. He said he’ll spend it with that young boy that got bit in Scotland.”

Silence falls between them. It’s covered by the music in the pub, laughter and loud arguments on every side.

Once a month, they get together. Boys night out, as Lily called them. The men in the Order had them, before Sirius even joined.

Of course, Sirius is not really welcomed there. Moody always stares at him, but thankfully Moody rarely comes to these things. Frank disagrees with most things Sirius does or says, and Benjy often murmurs about ‘bad blood’.

Once upon a time, Gideon would hover protectively around Sirius, surround him with his mates in the Hit Patrol. Now, Gideon doesn’t come either, for rather obvious reasons.

Fabian still does. He's playing darts with Peter and Mundungus in a corner. Edgar and Dedalus are whispering in each other's ears at the bar, casting suspicious glances at Sirius from time to time.

And James looks suspicious too, but there's also despair etched into his features.

Because James does not want to think that way about Remus. For James, even entertaining the notion that Remus might be lying to them, is pure *torture.*

"It's because of me, James. He's avoiding me." Ever since that day in St Mungo when Sirius reacted poorly as the Healer tried to grab his left arm, Remus had not come close to Sirius. "There's nothing nefarious going on."

He thinks Remus is like James; he cannot stand to think Sirius is betraying them, so he avoids Sirius. This way, he can't collect more 'proof' that Sirius is up to no good.

James looks in pain. He takes off his glasses. "More and more werewolves are said to join Greyback's pack. And I'm in my own bubble with Lily, you're understandably busy, Peter got his new job. What if Moony feels so left behind- what if he considers- We should make more efforts to-"

"Snap out of it. You always invite him over. I used to try to get him out of the house, too. He's just…well, he's Remus." Sirius stares at Benjy, who instantly looks away when he realises he was spotted. "I don't blame him for not coming here, anyway. It gets tiresome."

Sirius is the one to get the most stares, but Remus is a werewolf. He, too, gets plenty unfriendly looks.

"Can you- I mean," James lowers his voice even more, to the extent he almost climbs in Sirius' lap in order to be heard. "Can't you investigate or ask around? I know Remus would never go to Voldemort, but maybe he's connecting with the other werewolves, and-"

"No. I mean, I asked already," Sirius lies. He didn't. "It's all good. I'm telling you, he's just avoiding me."

"I want to-"

"Why are you all so gloomy?" Peter shows up at their backs, slapping a hand on each of their shoulders.

"Because I had to watch you miss that target for twenty times in a row, Pete," Sirius says, forcing a grin on his face. "You're making the Marauders look bad."

Peter laughs. "Sirius, last time you played darts, you hit Dedalus in the *forehead* instead of the mark-"

"Excuse me, I did that on purpose."

James stands, and he, too, forces a smile on his face. "Come on Wormtail, I'll team up with you."

“You’re blind!” Peter complains. “It will hardly help!”

(-)

“You will be the highest ranking Death Eater after me on this trip,” Rodolphus says, dressed in their black, charmed robes.

He has not yet put on the mask.

“You were given the honour of those marks-“ he points to Sirius’ mask, with the two lines, “on account of your blood. You were offered a high position at his side, even before proving your loyalty. It comes with responsibilities. You will conduct yourself well tonight. I don’t want to see tantrums. I don’t want to see you hesitate. I don’t want you to say something stupid that will give away your identity. You understand?”

“Fuck you, Lestrange.”

Rodolphus’ jaw ticks. “Your cousin is fucking me, and since you and her and essentially the same person, I believe we’re already somewhat fucking.”

“You miserable piece of-“

“It’s time,” Rodolphus says, putting on his colourful mask, decorated to hell and back, just as the clock announces midnight.

They Apparate to a forest outside London.

Five Death Eaters are already waiting there.

Sirius can’t believe he’s with *them.* His mind protests at the idea.

It’s easier to bear that knowledge when he has meetings with Bella and Lucius.

When it’s just him and Voldemort.

But this- masked men that want violence just for violence, that will attack defenceless muggles, just for fun… it’s revolting.

They don’t bow to Rodolphus, but they all nod, respectfully. Four of them had been huddled together, clearly talking between themselves. They know each other.

The sixth stands a little aside, his posture so clearly defensive.

“I am told you know one of them.”

“Evening, lads,” Rodolphus says, and really, he could take off his mask.

Everyone knows him. Sirius spent sufficient time in meetings with them, and Bella let slip away enough in their private conversations for Sirius to realise that it is Rodolphus that leads most of the Death Eaters. That many of the men had only seen Voldemort *once*, to be marked.

At least half of Voldemort's army- the lowly recruits, the ones with less noble names, with no fortunes, some with even *impure* blood- were recruited and organised by Rodolphus. They are Rodolphus's men.

They are loyal to Rody, Bella said proudly.

From what Sirius understands, sometimes they are men Rodolphus knew from school, or met shortly after.

Sometimes, they are people Lucius knows, and he points them out for Rodolphus to approach.

Lucius and Bella's privacy are of the most importance to Voldemort, at least from the Death Eaters Sirius knows of.

He will not risk Lucius be discovered, because Lucius is extremely useful, and he will not risk Bella, because…

Because Voldemort cares for her. Because Rodolphus adores her.

So it's Rodolphus that takes most of the risks.

Sirius gets curious looks, the marks on his mask attracting the most attention.

Rodolphus starts talking. They'll be grouped in pairs of two, and each pair is tasked to go to London and return with a muggle.

"Our friend here," Rodolphus pats him on the shoulder. "will accompany the freshest of you." He points to the lonely Death Eater.

Sirius tries to shake off the nausea. He had planned to come, but not participate. Just watch. Bad enough, but not this bad-

Don't protest. Just don't. It's useless. If Sirius won't do it, someone else will.

Whatever Sirius does that night, three muggles are getting tortured and killed.

The other two pairs of Death Eaters leave with loud pops.

Rodolphus looks at Sirius. Even through the mask, Sirius can feel the glare.

"Let's go, then," he barks at the lonely figure, who immediately approaches him.

And Sirius despises the small spark of satisfaction that comes from having someone obey without question. He hates that it's due to his mask, due to two fucking lines, a rank invented by a maniac-

Irrelevant. Stay focused.

The man takes out his wand and-

Snape.

Of course it's Snape. He's been heading down this path since Hogwarts. All his Slytherin mates were brothers or sons of Death Eaters.

Sirius just had an inkling it would be Snape, since Voldemort said Sirius will know him.

You fucking moron. You stupid, slimly, unwashed piece of shit.

The moment Sirius will pull out his wand, Snape will know him, too. Snape had Sirius' wand aimed at him too many times in seven years not to recognise it as fast as Sirius recognised his.

And that's a bad idea. A *terrible* prospect.

And yet, that sadistic, Black part of his brain cannot wait to have Snape realise he now has to obey Sirius.

You're not in Hogwarts anymore. This is important. You can't let school rivalry blind you.

Sirius keeps his wand hidden.

"You are familiar with muggle London?" he asks.

He knows Snape must be. At least a little. He's half muggle, after all.

"I can navigate my way around it," Snape answers. His voice is nothing like Snape's. It could be any other men.

Sirius makes a decision. *Forgive me,* he thinks to the skies.

He gives the directions to Snape and makes himself touch the Slytherin.

"Take us there."

Snape Apparates them away, and at least Sirius doesn't have to worry about splinching. Whatever Snape is, he is competent.

He's also nervous. His potions stained fingers shake a little when they arrive in a shady part of London.

The part where Sirius comes to get that cocaine he indulges in occasionally. And other things, pills and powders he doesn't know the name off, but that dull his emotion.

"I want something so I can't think. I don't want to feel," Sirius once told someone in that very corner.

Drug dealers are vulnerable. Police won't look for them too much.

Drug dealers are bad people, he tries to tell himself. They give those pills to Sirius, who can't die from them, the magic in his blood protecting him. But they give those drugs to kids, too, kids that do die.

Sirius tries to think that way, but he knows it's *bullshit.*

He knows it's an excuse he can't hide behind. He's about to pick someone to be killed, and nothing will make it acceptable.

"Take whoever you fancy," Sirius hisses at Snape, pointing to a street corner where some men are gathered, with little distance between them.

The situation is so *awful,* Sirius just disengages. He shoves aside all his feelings, all morals, all notions of right and wrong. He just needs to get through this.

Voldemort gave his word it will just be one time.

Snape might be masked, but Sirius can tell he's not that keen on this either. He hesitates.

Sirius thinks this is why every new Death Eater is made to do this. To see what type of person they are. Are they a blood thirsty fanatic? Do they kill easily? Do they enjoy torture? How do they conduct themselves?

It's valuable information, needed to sort the Death Eaters into several categories.

After some seconds, Snape stills himself and walks away.

Laughter follows, the muggles chuckling at the robe and mask, no doubt.

"Oi, nutter! It's summer. Halloween is months away!" More laughter.

A bad idea. Snape hates being laughed at. Nothing set him off in school like laughter did.

Sirius made sure to humiliate him often, in public, to the amusement of hundred of students.

In less than a minute, two of the muggles look away, eyes glazed, and the third comes towards Snape, equally confused.

"Take him back," Sirius orders and Snape Apparates away with the muggle.

Sirius takes a moment to breathe. In-out. In-out.

This shall end, too. He exhales one more time, and he allows magic to carry him to where he does not want to be.

(-)

The muggles beg, terrified and disorientated. They insist they won't tell anyone, just *please let us go.*

They aren't even hurt yet. Just scared.

"We'll have a hunt. What is life without a little excitement?" Rodolphus explains, both to the muggles and to the Death Eaters. "The scum will be given a head start. And then you give chase and bring them back."

He releases the muggles from their bindings. "Run," he says, softly, and the poor men go for it.

"Ah, look at the nitwits. They don't even have the brains to split up. Well, lads, it will be like fishing in a barrel. Wait a few minutes and go after them."

Do something.

No. Sirius stops himself. There is nothing to be done but live through this. The silence is deafening as they watch the muggles get lost in the trees. Sirius wonders if anyone ever escaped.

If there's a muggle out there insisting he was kidnapped by men in robes and masks.

"Go," Rodolphus says, after he checks his watch.

They all head out.

Not Sirius, but the rest.

"Go," Rodolphus says again, when it's just the two of them.

Sirius glares at him. "Make me."

Rodolphus doesn't join the others, either. He waits with Sirius in the clearing, a tense silence settling between them. It is very soon shattered by pained screams.

"I won't touch them," Sirius says. It's more to himself, a resolve, but Rodolphus ends up responding.

"They're just muggles. Merlin, toughen up."

"I am one word away from cursing you-"

"Try it." Rodolphus steps closer. "I don't know what you're playing at; why you are here."

"Are you fucking with me? I'm here because you insisted-"

"Don't play dumb. I don't mean here. I mean *here.*" He grabs Sirius' left hand, right above the mark. Sirius hisses at him, attempts to free himself, but Rodolphus' grip doesn't falter. "I

was young when you were born, but I remember how proud your father was when he came to our Manor and announced that an heir was born to him. Orion stood by me when few men did. He protected me. He spoke for me when none of the other bootlickers in the Sacred Families would. I've watched you grow up, Sirius, turn from a spoiled toddler into an amusing little shit. I owe your father. But if you betray my lord, if you betray Bellatrix, if you dare break her heart again, I'll shatter you into tiny pieces, I'll gather you back up into a box and deliver what remains of you to Grimmauld. And then I'll go after all your friends, and I'll show them even less mercy." Rodolphus releases him. "I don't know what you've done to charm our lord; Bella stubbornly refuses to accept your heart isn't with us, but I am not blinded by anything, Sirius. I am watching you *closely*. I hope, for all our sake, that you will make the right choices."

Sirius says nothing; because he understands. He understands Bellatrix, Voldemort and Rabastan mean everything to Rodolphus. His love and loyalty for them has no limits, and he will do anything to protect them.

"I love Bellatrix," Sirius finally answers, the only thing that could appease Rodolphus. "You know that."

"You're a selfish prick, like she is. Your love doesn't mean you'll do what's right. You actually tend to hurt those closest to you the most," Rodolphus says, but he backs off after that.

Once more, Sirius is forced to face the fact that no matter who wins this war, someone he loves will suffer and die.

His friends and Marlene on one side, his family on the other.

That knowledge is with him, constantly, since the battle in Dragon Alley. The fear he felt when Bella was cornered.

It's harder and harder to live with it; every time he reports back to Dumbledore, a voice whispers in his head that's he's actively working towards destroying *Bella*, risking his brother's life in the process, too.

And every time he thinks he can't do that anymore, he's reminded that if Voldemort wins, a terrible fate awaits Lily and, by extension, James.

Voldemort is easier to be made to grant favours, another voice whispers. If Voldemort wins, Sirius can ask for things.

But if Voldemort loses, it's not like the Ministry will grant Sirius a favour and spare Bella for him, is it?

"Oh, I know she's a murderer, I know she's unstable, but she's my cousin, so can you let it go? My brother, too, since we're at it?"

Yeah, he can picture Moody's face. It's not gonna go well.

Eventually, the muggles are recaptured.

Please, kill them already, he prays, cowardly.

But no. The Death Eaters drag their victim back to the clearing and Sirius can kiss goodby any chance of a restful sleep for a very, very long time.

This still would happen to them, even if you weren't here.

But Sirius is there. He's there when they start torturing them.

Rodolphus doesn't actually force anyone to do anything, he just stands to the side, silently, but as soon as a Death Eater lets loose the first Cruciatus, Sirius can feel the pressure mounting.

They all imagine they have to do it, Sirius thinks. One of the Death Eaters looks really into it. It's obvious. Sirius tries to focus on the wand the man holds, instead of the screams of agony.

One day, I'll find out who you are, and I'll kill you, Sirius promises.

The others are not as eager. Snape only does it once. His wand hand shakes.

Enough, he thinks, ten or fifteen minutes or an hour later. Time feels like an absurd notion, like Sirius is trapped in a bubble. *Enough.*

He steps forward. It's the right thing to do. The only thing Sirius can do for the muggles.

He pulls out his wand and kills them.

The silence that follows feels like a balm, and yet, somewhere inside his head, Sirius can still hear the muggles yelling, crying. He thinks he'll be hearing them for quite some time.

"We were just getting started," that man complains, the savage animal that took pleasure in what happened.

Dark magic rushes through Sirius' blood, after three Killing Curses in quick succession.

Aggressive. Addictive. It brings power with it, the thrill of a kill, even if Sirius did not want that kill.

"Are you questioning me?" he spits out, and he takes a step toward the masked man.

And this time it's his Black blood that sings in delight. No one should question a Black. Once upon a time, no one would have dared.

Sirius had to suffer years of hearing his family name disrespected by Order members, by muggleborns and rift-rafts in Diagon Alley; he suffered it and despised it and he won't have to suffer it here.

No one questions him. It's his birthright to lead.

The man shrinks back.

Snape looks down, and even if Sirius doesn't see his eyes, he's sure they are trained on Sirius' wand.

That's right, Snivellius. You sought refuge with Voldemort, hoping to escape ridicule and indignity? Well, you were wrong. Here I am.

Rodolphus laughs. He stalks to the bloodthirsty psychopath Sirius just snapped at, clasps a hand on his shoulder.

"If I were you, I wouldn't upset this one," he nods at Sirius. "Dreadful temper he has."

(-)

He curls up beside Marlene, holding her tightly. He's still in his Death Eater robes.

He dropped the mask on Marlene's cluttered floor.

He shivers, and he buries his head in her hair. It smells like smoke and hospital potions and Sirius takes great gulps of it, to clear his nose from what he left behind in that forest.

"Sirius?" she asks, voice rough with sleep. She tries to turn, but he holds her in place.

I killed three muggles. I stood there and watch while they were getting tortured. I picked one of them to suffer this fate. He wants to confess, wants to hear it will somehow be alright. He wants to be absolved.

"There is no need to burden women with our issues," his father says, when Sirius asks him why he never seems to talk with mother. "Our women must be sheltered from the outside world."

Sirius could never understand how his father could look at Walburga and Bellatrix Black and think they need protection.

Marlene needs no protection, either.

And yet Sirius still wants to keep them safe. Not because they are women, but because he cares for them.

"Men don't complain. Not to their wives, and not to other men or women," his father said, when Sirius hurt his knee and he wanted his mother to hold him, to tell him he'll be alright. But his father ripped him out of her arms and told him to be brave. Told him men don't cry.

"But it hurts," Sirius argues. "I was scared, there was so much blood-"

"You come to me," his father says, and he does hold Sirius, rubs his back, patiently. "If you feel in danger, if you are scared, you come to me. No one else must see you vulnerable. The world wants to see Blacks fail, but we musn't let them witness us in our lowest moments."

"But you weren't here," Sirius hiccups, wrapping his arms around his father's neck.

"That's why you have to learn to soothe yourself. To stand on your own. In case I'm not there to lift you up."

"Are you alright?" Marlene whispers, and her hand covers his own, pressed tightly against her heart.

"Yeah," he whispers. "I'm fine."

(-)

"Snape's a Death Eater. I saw him."

Dumbledore has the nerve to look saddened. *If it is so disheartening, you should have done something about it while he was still in school. You should have done something about Tom Riddle, while he was still in school.*

But Dumbledore won't ever waste his time with unsalvageable Slytherins. He'll ignore them while they are under his nose and then he and the rest of the wizarding world get to lament their fate when they turn out nasty.

"He's allowing you to see his men unmasked?"

"No," Sirius answers. "But I'd know Snape anywhere."

Dumbledore believes that. "In what circumstances-"

Sirius lifts a hand. "You don't need to know the details." He squares his shoulders and glares at Dumbledore.

He expects the Professor to insist, to say something, and Sirius is ready to fight. To set boundaries.

Surprisingly, Dumbledore doesn't poke at him. "Anything else?" he asks.

Barty Crouch's son is a Death Eater. My brother is a Death Eater. My cousin. My other cousin's husband.

We won't win this war. We're fucked. Why did you send me to him? Why didn't you let me die?

"No." Sirius says, playing with his wand.

(-)

Sirius is trying to decide how was it possible for Voldemort to set *this* up.

They're in Lestrange dining room, seated at opposite ends of a long dinner table.

Alone.

Sirius was asked to have dinner with the Lestranges. Apparently, so was Voldemort.

But when Sirius arrived, he only found Voldemort seated at the grand table.

"Druella collapsed. Bellatrix extends her apologies, but she rushed over to St Mungo's with Rodolphus, to be at her mother's side," he said.

"I'll take my leave, then-"

"A pity to allow such a nice meal to go to waste. Since we are both here… sit."

And here they are, indeed.

"Where's Rabastan?" Sirius barks, irritated. He feels tricked. He's suspicious.

"Around." Voldemort takes a sip of wine, his ugly ring glinting in the candlelight. "I invited him to join us, but I suspect he's too terrified of me to properly enjoy a meal in my presence. He declined."

"Maybe I want to decline," Sirius spits out.

"Are you terrified, too?" Voldemort smiles, taunting.

"Trembling," Sirius says, making sure to roll his eyes.

To show he's not afraid, and also in an effort to occupy his mouth before he says something stupid, Sirius loads his plate with whatever is closest to him.

He doesn't pay attention, and he suffers for it, when he gets a fork full of lamb. He detests lamb. But he chews, swallows, and takes another.

"You are upset with me," Voldemort says, after some extremely awkward minutes.

Sirius can't answer with his mouth full. That would be rude. So he makes sure to keep his mouth full all the time.

One-sided conversations don't seem to deter Voldemort.

"You weren't your usual cheeky self last Tuesday."

Woke up on the wrong side of the bed, Sirius thinks, and he stuffs his mouth with mashed potatoes.

“Have I done something to offend you?”

Sirius shrugs. He’s determined not to say a single word. *Fuck you, you want to have dinner with me? You should have asked mum, first. She’d have told you I’m not pleasant company at meals.*

“I saw your brother the other day.”

Sirius slams his fork on the table so hard, his glass almost topples over. He glares up, just in time to see the flicker of satisfaction on Voldemort’s face, at finally getting a reaction.

“You gave me your word you’ll leave him alone,” Sirius hisses, after he swallows.

“I didn’t call him,” Voldemort says. “An honest coincidence. He was visiting Bella, and we met in the hallway.”

Now that’s fuel for nightmares. Not that Sirius needs any fuel for those. Plenty of scenarios plague his mind at night, but an image of Voldemort and Regulus in a poorly lit hallway quickly climbs toward the top most horrific things he can conjure in his head.

“Or am I not *allowed* to greet the boy?” Voldemort asks, and his smile now has a dangerous twist to it.

One of his long fingers trail over the shiny edge of a knife he hadn’t yet picked up.

“What do you want from me?” Sirius asks. When he agreed to spy, he thought Voldemort would be like Dumbledore. Or an evil version of Dumbledore, whatever.

An older leader, that only talks about war and tactics and politics.

Sirius doesn’t duel with Dumbledore. He doesn’t have dinner with Dumbledore. There are no games with the old Professor.

Sirius doesn’t understand what Voldemort *wants*, why he seemed displeased when Sirius was in no mood for banter last Tuesday, when they first saw each other after that ordeal with the muggles.

He doesn’t understand why he’s there, having dinner with him.

Voldemort stands, an economy of movement, swift and elegant. He walks alongside the table, and his long braid falls over his back.

His hair is not as shiny and thick as it was in the picture Sirius still has in his nightstand.

It’s thinner now, far longer, and it has lost its shine. It’s still almost entirely dark brown, but Sirius catches just the slightest glimmer of silver intertwined with the rest.

Sirius' finger curl around his knife; Voldemort not only sits at Sirius' side, but he drags the chair *closer*.

"I didn't make you kill those muggles, Sirius," he says. "It was your choice. You are no longer a child to blame your actions on others."

"You expected me to-"

"I didn't expect you to do anything. That is the point; to see how new, potential Death Eaters react to such violence. Some men lose their nerve and they back away. Others relish in it. Some are indifferent. You were the only one there to bear my mark already. The others are allowed that honour- or not- only after Rodolphus sees how they conduct themselves; if they'd be an asset to our cause, or a nuisance. A liability."

"So why did you send me? Since I am already marked."

Voldemort doesn't move a finger, but a bottle floats from the ice bucket and hovers in mid air, pouring wine in two glasses.

"Rodolphus inisists you would never truly join us; that you are too soft. He doesn't disagree with me often, but he's been voicing his displeasure about my decision to mark you so fast. He doesn't understand my interest in you."

That's one thing Sirius and Rodolphus can settle on; he scoffs at being called *soft*, but he, too, does not understand the interest.

"He was convinced you'd reveal your true loyalties to Dumbledore and won't allow the muggles to be hurt. I was convinced you'd watch on, with your usual apathy towards the plight of those around you that you do not deem important enough to warrant your protection." He smiles again. "You proved us both wrong. That does not happen often, Sirius. I can count on one hand the number of times I was wrong, and I'd still have fingers left."

Sirius works very hard to squash the pride that tries to rise inside him. *You shouldn't care about what he thinks of you.*

"I did not send you there to kill. Rodolphus didn't ask you to kill. It was a choice. It was, I imagine, a mercy. You don't even really care, deep inside. You only think you should care, because that's what your friends taught you, what Dumbledore tries to instil in you: the absurd notion that all life is precious. But you don't truly subscribe to that point of view. Let it go, Sirius. Stop tormenting yourself. The muggles aren't worth it, and we both know it. This war will last a while longer. It will be gruesome and taxing. Save your energy for those that matter."

"If Dumbledore doesn't get to tell me who to care or not to care about, you don't get to do it either," Sirius says.

Voldemort's smile only widens. He offers Sirius a nod- the briefest incline of his head. "I'm not trying to brainwash you; to rearrange the way in which you perceive the world around you. I am merely advising you to be yourself without guilt." He leans over, elbow on the

table, supporting his head. “Of course, if you decide you wish to torment yourself uselessly, I cannot change that.”

Sirius is forced to lean back, sink more into his chair, to put some distance between them. He’s far too close, and it makes Sirius anxious, it makes his pulse spike and he is confused, undecided if he likes the adrenaline- or *whatever* it is- or he doesn’t.

It’s too intense, so he retreats, forgets Blacks aren’t supposed to back down.

He shoves a hand in his robe and pulls out his cigarettes.

The first inhale of smoke calms him a bit. “I want to know something,” he says, because Voldemort keeps staring at him, without blinking. “Since you go on about those important to me.”

“Ask,” Voldemort says, and he reaches over, hand brushing by Sirius’ own.

He steals one of Sirius’ cigarettes. He lights it with *Finedfyre*. So over the top ridiculous. But it is Fiendfyre, plain as day. A tiny dragon rises from his palm in the red-orange glow before it’s swiftly gone, just as it was trying to split and grow into another fiery beast.

It’s absurd, unnecessary, but *remarkable*. To summon the Great Fire with the flick of a wrist, to control it, banish it without the slightest effort, confidently place it so close to one’s face-

Sirius’ forgets to breathe for a second.

“Sirius?” Voldemort sounds very pleased.

He shakes his head, and *oh, right.* He was about to ask Voldemort something important.

He tries to tear his eyes off that hand, that now only holds a cigarette between long fingers, but that can hold so much power, at any given moment.

Sirius tries so hard- *dreams*- of disarming Voldemort in a duel. He knows it’s impossible, but he keeps dreaming.

But even if he would- Voldemort doesn’t need a weapon. He *is* a weapon.

“Remus,” Sirius says, still distracted.

Voldemort does not react. “Lupin?”

“Yes.”

Voldemort grabs his glass and he toys with it. The wine swishes around, dangerously close to the crystal edges, but does not spill over.

“He was approached by his maker. But he rejected Fenrir.”

Something in Sirius relaxes. “Some say a wolf cannot deny the one that bit them.”

“Werewolves are particularly social creatures. Yet our society rejects them, so they create their own. Greyback’ pack is the largest in Britain. He gathers them up and keeps them safe. They are not my Death Eaters, since as you know they are beneath us, or so my most influential Death Eaters think. Even so, at my behest, they learned to tolerate Fenrir so I can make use of him and his pack.”

Dumbledore had said as much.

“No wolf has rejected him before. But Lupin, a singular case, already has a pack of his own. He doesn’t need Fenrir.”

Sirius’s heart gives a little shock of pain. For even half way distrusting Remus. He never really suspected, but after his talk with James, a shard of doubt was born and it was another reason to lose sleep over.

Don’t relax. Nothing stops him from bullshitting you. He’s the dark lord, he’s known for deceit.

Yet is hard to listen to Voldemort and not believe. There’s something so alluring about him, something that, beyond reason, seems honest. He could be telling Sirius the sky is green, and it’s possible Sirius might believe that too, at least until he gets out and sees it’s not.

“Fenrir was so surprised to be rejected, he stalked him around on a full moon. That’s when he smelled three other people there. He was convinced Lupin must have bitten someone, and that is why he can say no to him.”

Sirius laughs. “Yes, I noticed that shoddy attempt at spying. We had a laugh about it.”

“Curious that you could sense him. He found that very curious. Because he is good at stalking. He’s a two hundred-year-old wolf. He truly is a magnificent beast.”

“I am a magnificent *wizard.* A beast can’t trick me.”

“Your prejudice is dripping, Sirius.” Voldemort smiles, takes a long drag out of his cigarette. “Once more, you show your hypocrisy; you hold the same opinion about werewolves as my Death Eaters, as long as it’s not Lupin himself. The rest are all savage beasts that could be put to death, but as long as Lupin survives, you’d be alright with it.”

“Most werewolves are terrible pieces of shit,” Sirius says, shrugging. “They bite children, for Merlin’s sake. Why should I hold them in any regard?”

“You know Lupin is not a beast that hunts children or lives in the woods, eating deers. He integrated. Because he was educated, received in society. The others are not. They’re alone, rejected, spat upon. What do you expect them to do?”

“I don’t care,” Sirius says, and he is a little surprised about it. Voldemort has a point. Sirius truly is very apathetic to these matters.

A deep laugh. “Oh, I know.” His eyes spark with amusement. “So, will you tell me? Why Lupin is able to reject the call of the pack? Why the animalistic part of him refuses to submit

to his maker, even under the full moon, where his rational mind, his loyalty to *good* and Dumbledore does not exist?"

"No," Sirius says, smirking. He downs his glass in one go, the wine sweet and bitter at the same time.

"A pity. I would so like to see your Animagus form."

Fuck. He enjoys spitting Voldemort's secrets in his face, but he surely doesn't appreciate it when it's directed back to him.

Another laugh. "Oh, Sirius. You should know these things. A werewolf can only connect with other canines. Never with a human. Not strongly enough, at least, to disobey his maker. He's not one to bite others to form another pack. He doesn't submit to Greyback, even under the full moon, because he already submitted to another wolf. It that not why you became an animagus? To make sure Lupin will not stray to my side?"

"No," Sirius says. "We didn't think about that. We were twelve when I found out he's a werewolf. James, Peter and I. We decided to turn, to keep him company. It was just that. A child's desire to help a friend."

"*Twelve?*" Voldemort asks, a little surprised.

"We only finished the process when we were fifteen."

"Still very impressive. And all under Dumbledore's nose. I do like it when things are done in his school that he knows nothing about."

Sirius rolls his eyes but he and the others also felt a lot of pride, being able to fool such great teachers.

"We just ran around the grounds with Remus."

"That would have ended badly, if none of you were able to subdue him."

"James and I, we are big animals."

"Not physically. You could transform into a bear and you wouldn't be able to hold down a werewolf. Which one of you is the wolf, because I doubt all three of you just happened to be one?"

"None. I'm a dog."

Voldemort smiles, triumphant.

"If you'd be an animagus, you'd be a hedgehog," Sirius says, mockingly. "You're a solitary, nocturnal animal that likes to fight, and you're full of spikes."

"Why would anyone want to turn into an animal is beyond me," Voldemort says, and again he leans closer over Sirius.

Gods be good, take him off me, he thinks, drawing back, but there's nowhere else to go.

His ears start ringing, and he can feel the blood whooshing through his head. He can barely hear Voldemort when he keeps talking.

"But animagus forms tend to be identical with the corporeal Patronus a wizard conjures. Long before, I could cast one."

Why can't you cast one anymore? It's a rather standard NEWT spell. True, most idiots can't do it, but Voldemort is no idiot.

But instead of asking that, Sirius' mouth operates on its own accord.

"What was it? Your Patronus?"

What would he be as an animagus?

Voldemort smiles, and really, there can't be more than an *inch* or two between them.

"A cat."

Fuck me.

Sirius opens his mouth, and just then the door opens, and Bellatrix steps through.

In the blink of an eye, Voldemort is back at a respectable distance.

"I'm so sorry, my lord. My mother is fine. She was just being dramatic, as usual."

Rodolphus is behind her. His eyes go between Sirius and Voldemort, and then they return to Sirius, positively apprehensive.

Chapter End Notes

Please, if you have the time, let me know if you enjoyed the chapter. Thank you!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"We'll go inside," Voldemort says, when Sirius Apparates to the cabin on Tuesday.

But I want to duel. I don't want to be shut in a small cabin with you. Sirius follows him inside, regardless of his wishes.

There's tea on the table. Sirius does not want a repeat of Lestrange Manor dining room.

It replays in his mind, enough. When he's about to go to sleep, or when he's standing in line to buy cigarettes, or when he's at the bar, ordering a drink. He keeps seeing Voldemort so close-

"I don't like tea," he says. "Dumbledore gives me tea."

The teacup vanishes before he even finishes his sentence. It's replaced with water.

"Better?" Voldemort drawls, sarcastic.

"No," Sirius says, but he sits.

Voldemort comes at his side- *oh, gods, not again*- but he does something even worse than sit right next to Sirius.

He pulls a vial out of his robe and pours it in Sirius's glass.

"That's Veritaserum," Sirius says, heart in his throat.

"It is." Voldemort sits at the head of the table.

Sirius stares at him.

"I'm teaching you how to duel, but that's not all there is to learn, though I am sure it is what most appeals to you. However, you have a special position at my side. In case of capture, you need to learn to resist Veritaserum."

If that's supposed to reassure Sirius, it doesn't. Now, on top of having to deal with Veritaserum, he has to think about capture.

He tries to pick his words carefully.

"My position implies secrecy," Sirius says. "You know there are things I can't tell you, if I am to be trusted by Dumbledore. If you find out certain facts, he'll know it was me and he won't ever-"

Voldemort nods. “I will not ask you anything about the Order. As is the case with open double spies, the information you trade between us should be left at your discretion.”

“You want me to believe that you won’t ask for anything important, while you have me under Veritaserum?” Sirius is very skeptical.

“Yes.”

Well, I don’t believe it. And yet, as always, a part of him wants to trust the dark lord.

What is wrong with my brain? I scoff at Death Eaters for trusting him blindly and yet look at me- what is he doing to us? What unknown dark magic is this?

“Drink, Sirius.”

He’s happy when the anger shows up, the indignity of being ordered around. He still hates Voldemort; it’s all good. He’s not like the other Death Eaters.

Sirius drinks it in one go.

“Good Occlumens can evade the truth serum,” Voldemort says.

“I know!” Sirius snaps, and fuck it, he feels the words wrenched out of him, the truthfulness of them.

Voldemort smiles. “Then do it. Occlude. You must calm your mind.”

Sure, calm your mind, with Lord Voldemort staring you down. No problem.

But Sirius can Occlude. His father started teaching him before his fourth year at Hogwarts. And Sirius’ fear to disappoint his father was far greater than his fear of Voldemort.

Bella helped him a lot, giving him extra lessons, perched on Grimmauld’s roof.

Sirius should have practiced it more, like his father advised.

He did, for a long time. Especially at Hogwarts, where he couldn’t drink or take potions and muggle drugs, when he was alone, his father ill, when he abandoned his family.

But after Hogwarts, Sirius preferred to numb himself by more pleasant means.

Drugs, sex, and loud muggle music.

“Alright,” he says, making order in his mind, the way he was taught.

“You will eventually learn to lie under it. For the moment, half-truths will work, until you become more comfortable. Until you build up a resistance to the Serum. Like any mind-altering potions, one can build up a resistance. What is your name?”

“Siri-” Sirius bites his tongue to stop the words.

Focus. Clam.Half-truths.

“Padfoot,” Sirius says, and he feels a sharp pain in his temples, the potion unsatisfied.

But he said it.

Even Voldemort looks a tad surprised.

“Good. That’s very good.”

The problem with Veritaserum is that it calls the truth forward, not only for the man asking the questions, but for the *drinker*.

Under the effects of potion, Sirius cannot lie to himself about how pleased he is to hear he’s doing good, how smug he feels to surprise Voldemort.

Voldemort keeps his word. He doesn’t ask anything of importance. Insignificant things, like Sirius’ favourite foods, or favourite books. He tries to lie, but while he can’t outright lie, the pain too great to do so, he sometimes manages half-truths, *almost* lies. But when Voldemort asks questions rapidly, one after the other, Sirius struggles with it.

When he is finally given the antidote, Sirius finds himself afflicted with one of the worst headaches of his life.

“You did better than expected,” Voldemort says. “For your first try, it was quite impressive.”

“How did Bella do?” Sirius asks, rubbing his temples. He receives another glass of water. This time without any potion in it.

“She’s terrible.” A fond smile. “She’s an excellent Occlumens, but somehow it doesn’t help her with Veritaserum. A mystery, that girl. I assume she’s just too...honest, in general. She isn’t used to hiding.”

“How about Lucius?”

Voldemort laughs. That laugh he only has when they are alone. It does something to his face, softens it in a way, though ‘soft’ is not quite right; it is not a word that can be in any way associated with Voldemort. Yet Sirius finds no other word for whatever the laugh does to his features.

“Lucius was born to lie. I still dose him, when he least expects it, but it’s been years since he allowed any truth slip under the serum.”

“I’ll get the hang of it,” Sirius mutters to himself. He hates to be outdone. Especially by a Malfoy.

“I have no doubt you will.” A smile greets Sirius this time, one of those that promise something dark. “I will make sure of it.”

(-)

Remus is the coldest he's ever been when they all meet for Peter's birthday dinner.

"What crawled up his arse?" Marlene whispers in Sirius' ear, as Peter recalls a prank they pulled in their fifth year.

He doesn't answer, shrugging it off, trying not to let it bother him.

Lily does her best to be friendly with Marlene, but it's like trying to befriend an angry Rottweiler. And though Sirius would never say it out loud, Lily isn't exactly easy-going either. She was always terribly opinionated, and she has a short temper, so Sirius does not predict any sort of friendship between them.

Lily's attempts at being civil are short-lived, and they end up snapping at each other for the entire meal.

Peter's date, a Gryffindor that was a year behind them at Hogwarts and that Sirius vaguely remembers snogging once or twice, sits between the two girls, looking rather uncomfortable.

Remus ends up leaving early, muttering something about feeling tired. To be fair, he does look exhausted, but then Remus always does.

"I hate this," James says, quietly, following Sirius into the kitchen. Peter bought a refrigerator for his mum, because she can no longer charm the pantry to properly keep food from spoiling, and Sirius is fascinated with it, likes to open it and close it just to see it light up when he does.

"I'm sorry," he says, taking a beer out. This refrigerator thing does keep things cool. The beer is colder than it usually is when just charmed.

"It's not your fault," James insists.

Sirius shrugs. It is his fault. For what he did in their sixth year, and now for acting 'suspicious'.

It hurts, but Sirius is doing his best to harden his heart where Remus is concerned.

(-)

"You will come with me to a pack event on the next full moon," Voldemort says, just as Sirius was preparing to leave the cabin after a Tuesday meeting.

"What?" he asks, tired and a tad dizzy. "A pack *what*?"

“One of Greyback’s sons will marry a girl from Ireland. Their packs will unite as one.”

Sirius blinks at him. “Good for them,” he says. “Why are you going?”

Voldemort busies himself with some potions vials he brought, to help heal Sirius’ inevitable injuries after the duels. “Because the Irish wolves will swear fealty to me, once they are incorporated in Fenrir’s pack.”

“Why am *I* coming?”

A short silence, only broken by the soft noises of vials clinking against each other as Voldemort arranges them in a box.

“It will look good to have a pureblood from the Sacred Twenty Eight there to welcome them. And I can’t bring anyone else. You know how the rest of my Death Eaters feel about werewolves.”

Sirius gawks at him. “I’m not a fan, either.”

“You’re the least likely to offend them, I imagine. Go. You should rest.”

Sirius has more things to say about this werewolf absurdity, but he is indeed very tired. And a bit drowsy after the potions.

So he Apparates away and crawls into his bed.

Just as he drifts off, it downs on him Voldemort practically invited him to a wedding.

He falls asleep laughing.

(-)

Sirius keeps expecting Lucius to ask for something, to blackmail him.

But Lucius doesn’t, and it’s worse than if he would; at least that way they could put it behind them.

Like a Slytherin, Lucius might hold on to that favour for years, until the opportune moment comes, and Sirius hates living with it hanging over his head.

Something must be obvious about it, because Bella drags him into the gardens of Malfoy Manor after a family meal. One that Sirius felt he had to attend, because he thinks it wouldn’t be smart to refuse any of Lucius’ invitations.

“What’s going on?” she asks him. “You are being awfully civil with the peacock.”

I’m just being well mannered, love.

I'm doing it for Cissa.

Sirius comes up with ten excuses, all at the tip of his tongue, but this is Bella.

"He has shit on me," Sirius confesses.

A perfect eyebrow lifts on her equally perfect face. "About?"

Sirius grabs a cigarette, plays with it between his fingers. "It would get me in trouble. With Voldemort."

She inhales, sharply. "What did you do?"

Sirius hesitates. She slaps him, lightly, over the shoulder. Almost playfully, but not really. "Don't be an idiot. If there's one person in this world you can trust, it's me." She grabs the cigarette from between his lips before he can light it. She throws it on the ground. "When our lord asked me, a year ago, if I have any idea about why Lupin could refuse Greyback, I said I didn't. Because I swore to you I would tell no one about Padfoot."

He smiles. She looks intense, too intense, but that's how he likes her best, with that mad glint in her eyes.

"He found out about Padfoot, anyway. He put it together."

"He always does," Bella whispers. "You must tell me what you did, so I can try to mitigate it."

He takes her further into the grounds, way out by the lake. They sit on an ancient stump, larger than Sirius' dining table.

He tells her. Everything. Well, almost. How he started to investigate Voldemort, how he found out Voldemort's name from Hagrid; the stolen file. The visit to his hometown.

Azkaban.

He tells her about Morfin and the suffocating spell, but not what he saw in Morfin's head. Just that the man started freaking out when Sirius asked him about Voldemort.

When he's done, she puts her elbows on her knees, lowers her head between them.

"And Lucius got the registry. He doesn't know I killed Morfin, but- well. It's bad enough without that, really. Voldemort told me to stop after the file. In no uncertain terms."

She still has no reaction. He nervously keeps talking.

"And I'm not one to be afraid. You know I'm not. But he sounded like- I don't know."

It's not so much to do with fear. It's that Voldemort looked almost vulnerable for a second, when he saw his name on that file in Sirius' hands. It was so personal for him, and Sirius feels guilty for poking at it.

You can't feel guilty. That's stupid. He's a genocidal maniac, a murderer, you are meant to bring him down, not feel guilty you looked into his past.

Yet- yet that feels like a low blow. Killing him, bringing him down, ending the war- whatever. It's war. Everything goes.

Everything *but* family. It is a low blow to pick on that.

Sirius is, after all, very sensitive about his own family, so-

"What is it?" Bella's voice comes, muffled from her position.

"Huh?"

"His name. What is his name?" It's difficult to tell, but he thinks she sounds tortured.

"You don't know? Rodolphus knows! Lucius-"

"Rodolphus won't speak it, and I wasn't aware Lucius knew. I mean, obviously, I suspected *he* is a Gaunt, but that's all."

She straightens her back, and she looks at him, a bit wild-eyed.

Sirius opens his mouth, and she rushes forward and covers it with her hand.

"No. Fuck, no! Forget I asked. I don't want to know it."

Sirius blinks at her, confused.

"It's not right. He doesn't want me to know. So I won't. Unless he tells me. Never tell me, do you hear!? Never. Promise me. Even if I beg you, later, you won't ever say it. Promise!"

She takes her hand off his mouth and glares at him.

"Alright," Sirius agrees.

Does Voldemort know- does he even *suspect* how utterly loyal Bellatrix is? What treasure he has on his side? Is he capable of being grateful for this perfect, mad, dependable woman?

"It's tricky," she goes on, turning her dark eyes to the lake. "With Lucius, I mean. He's a slimy snake. I think it's best I straight up threaten him I'll murder him if he tells on you."

Sirius snorts.

"I would," Bella says, incensed. "If he dares cause you any hurt, I'd rip him to pieces, Cissy be damned."

Sirius *is* grateful for Bella. He is perfectly aware how blessed he'd been to have her beside him.

But she is Bella. She loves Narcissa, too. She chews on her lip, trying to find a solution to his predicament.

“Though Lucius cares for Cissy,” she says, pensive. “He wouldn’t really fuck you over, knowing how badly that would wound her and I. I think not, at least. Unless it would be really drastic, unless he’d need to save his skin.”

“Yeah,” Sirius agrees. “I just don’t enjoy living with that hanging over my head.”

“Then don’t.” And now she licks her lip, and it distracts Sirius so much, he almost doesn’t understand her next words. “Confess. Go to our lord and tell him yourself.”

His eyes snap back to meet her own. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I told you, he meant it when he said I am to drop the subject.”

“And I told you he *always* figures out everything. Nothing goes past him, Sirius. Eventually, he’ll learn of it, like he learned of Padfoot. It doesn’t even have to be Lucius. You went to Azkaban. There are the guards, and their families, and who knows what other politician heard from them that you’ve been there. It’s best if you tell him. It will make him mad, but it won’t be a betrayal, as it would be if he learns of it from someone else. Just tell him the truth. That you couldn’t help yourself. He knows-” she bites her lip again. “He often asks me about you, about things from our past. He’s more curious about you than I’ve ever seen him over anyone else. And I always tell him you are impulsive, like I am. I ask him to have patience, because you’re young and prone to do idiotic things before you think them through.”

She nods to herself, more and more confident. “He knows you are my heart. He knows I would do- and I *did* -everything for him. I’d give my life for him, but he must be aware my family is off limits. Yes, yes,” she nods. “You must tell him. It’s the smartest thing to do. You’ll be fine. Just look apologetic, for Merlin’s sake. Say it, and shut up, afterwards. Don’t meet his eyes, show a modicum of deference and wait for the rage to pass.”

(-)

A *lot* of werewolves. Sirius didn’t imagine there would be so many. He’s certain there are around one hundred in the clearing, if not more.

And they are hostile, glares aimed at Sirius, whispers of ‘human’ spat venomously as he and Voldemort walk amongst them.

You filthy animals, Sirius thinks. *How is ‘human’ an insult?*

He says nothing. There’s too many of them to pick a fight. And they’re nothing like Remus, who is nerdy and thin, soft and kind.

Some here are also thin, but sinewy muscles are visible on their almost naked bodies.

Most werewolves aren't like modest, prudish Remus. They are not ashamed of the scars; they flaunt them.

They are forest dwellers, and it shows.

Some of the men are massive, like Greyback and his sons. *Trueborn.* Not bitten, but born with the curse they insist is, in fact, a *gift*.

The very rare ones that can transform at will, at any given moment, full moon or not, night or day.

Padfoot snarls in his head when faced with these beasts, displeased.

Voldemort gets stares, too, but not as unfriendly as the ones aimed at Sirius.

More like curious.

He's human, too, you stupid animals, Sirius thinks, meeting the glare of a werewolf that would make Rodolphus look like a malnourished child.

And there's Greyback, heading in their direction; Sirius and Padfoot react as one, a visceral hate that is hard to contain.

Padfoot knows the smell of him. *Enemy. Danger.*

Sirius shakes his head and shoves the animalistic part of him deep down where it belongs.

He'd spent too many full moons as a dog. Far too many. He missed the last few months, but for years before that, he was Padfoot as soon as the full moon blossomed in the sky, and it's almost second nature to shift to that mentality on these sort of nights.

He stiffens at Voldemort's side, but Greyback doesn't spare Sirius much thought, focused on Voldemort.

He doesn't kneel, and Sirius didn't imagine he would. He's no Death Eater. And, besides, he's to the werewolves what Voldemort is to his Death Eaters. A leader. He can't be seen kneeling.

They talk, but it doesn't seem important, so Sirius looks around him.

He assumes the one with flowers in her hair in the bride. She has a 'dress' made of leaves, and she's surrounded by other women, old and young, that mustn't have brushed their hair in a long, long time.

Yeah, there is no way Remus will ever join a pack. He's obsessed with cleanness, and he's such a prude, he never left the bathroom without a towel wrapped around him, while Sirius and James had no issues walking around naked in their dormitory.

Eventually Greyback goes away to climb on a tall rock, and all the werewolves turn to look at him. The silence that falls is deep and terrified and adoring, as they crouch down before their

pack leader.

Who knew he'd be such a skilled speaker? Sirius thinks, listening to Greyback as he launches into a monologue about brotherhood, and rights, and freedom.

"Wizards are taking our brothers and sisters away from us, dress them in robes, and force them to be civil. They brainwash them, humiliate them, but they never truly accept our kind, even if we play by their rules and register. Even if we obey. We cannot coexist, not with the wizards of today."

Murmurs of approval, rage and fury rising from the crowd.

Sirius, too, is enraged, because he is a wizard, and he doesn't take kindly to these shitheads badmouthing his kind.

Are you aware you're standing on a fucking rock, talking to a mostly naked crowd? Sirius would like to ask Greyback. How dare he-

"But not all wizards are the same," the werewolf goes on, and he turns to look at Voldemort.

A hundred pair of eyes follow his direction, and now they're all staring at Voldemort.

"The dark lord understands our plight. He pledged to fight for our cause. As allies, we will topple down the Ministry and we will liberate our brothers and sisters. We will break their shackles and throw down their muzzles."

What fucking muzzles? Remus wears no muzzle-

Voldemort inclines his head respectfully and the werewolves cheer.

Sirius wonders what exactly will Voldemort do with the pack, if he wins?

He might have promised Greyback rights and freedom and whatever, but Lucius and Rodolphus will not accept it, no more than the current Ministry.

"There's a potion being made by wizards," Greyback says. He paces up and down his rock. "Wolfsbane," he spits. "They don't even try to hide their intention, right there in the name. The *bane of wolves.*"

Angry mutters. Hisses and growls that make Sirius' skin crawl.

"It would render us weak under the full moon. Malleable. Obedient. *Tame.*"

More growls.

"They'll lie to us that we can live in their society, that we can have rights, as long as we take their poison. And our brainwashed brethren will line up for it; they'll try to convince you to take it. That it's for our own good. *Lies.*"

The anger is palpable.

What potion? Sirius never heard of it.

“If not for the dark lord's efforts, it would have been made and distributed by now. He stopped them, and for that, we are grateful.”

The eyes turn on Voldemort again. Many sparks of ember now, a low fire burning inside every pair.

The moon is almost up, and Sirius can see it in their eyes; the eyes *always* shift first.

“They’ll turn,” Sirius whispers, when Greyback starts talking again, and his pack gives him all their attention. “Soon. Very soon.”

“Well, it is the full moon,” Voldemort whispers back, amused. “That’s what they do on such occasions, as you know.”

Sirius stares at him. He didn’t imagine they’ll still be there when the moon was out.

“There are over a hundred werewolves here. Angry werewolves. That hate wizards,” Sirius spits. “All around us. And *we* are wizards, in case you forgot.”

A lazy smile. “They like me.”

Sirius blinks at him. “Now. With their human brain. Once they turn...”

Remus adores- or used to adore- Sirius and James and Peter. But if he transformed beside them and they’d be in their human form, he’d kill them in a heartbeat. He wouldn’t recognise them.

“Are you afraid, Sirius?” he asks, just as the first scream starts, that signals the beginning of a transformation. And that’s all it takes.

One shift, and it triggers all the others, and Sirius watches in horror as their bodies contort and shift.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” Voldemort says, and damn his Black blood, damn his pride, because Sirius casts away the genuine danger of a hundred angry werewolves right beside him, and chooses to get offended by Voldemort.

“I don’t need your protection,” he spits, which is a lie. He knows it, he knows he’ll be eaten alive in five minutes, but he’d rather be shredded to pieces than admit he might need help.

He resists the instinct to move closer to Voldemort.

He looks back to the wolves, and there are wolves now. Only a dozen men and women are still in their human form. The trueborns. The ones that can control their transformation.

The others are hunched, and they are growling, eyes on Sirius and Voldemort.

Fuck.

And then Greyback shifts, such a different process than the others. No screams, no bones popping out- a seamless, easy, *natural* transformation.

It's just habit, it's just ingrained in Sirius to turn when there's a werewolf around.

The magic works on its own, with little control from him.

Before he knows it, he's staring at the wolves from a lower position, and the smell hits him with his keen senses.

"Sirius!"

That's Voldemort, and he sounds… unhappy.

He smells like humans. Like wizards. That smell of magic, of crackling static, of gathering storms, that muggles do not have.

He smells nice, Padfoot thinks and wags his tail.

But Voldemort tries to grab his fur and Padfoot growls and jumps away.

And before Voldemort can take his wand and force Padfoot back into a human, Padfoot takes off, with a speed that is impossible when he's Sirius.

He leaps over uneven patches of ground, and it's nice. He hadn't run in such a long time. He missed it.

He missed the way the earth smells, the grass and dirt; the sound of running water, somewhere in the distance.

And he hadn't felt such aggression in a long time.

His hackles rise when he's faced with a bunch of wolves, circling him in.

Padfoot growls at them, low in his throat, displays his teeth.

Back away, he says.

Moony was aggressive, too, once upon a time. Moony stared at Padfoot, challenging him, and Padfoot put him in his place. Once, twice, three times, and then Moony submitted, and never tried to challenge Padfoot again.

But there was only Moony.

Howls all around him.

Sirius barks.

A wolf goes for the bite, but he misses. Padfoot could take him, but there are so many of them.

Back away, he tells them. *Now.*

He stares them down, unflinching.

And then one wolf flops on his back, showing his belly to Padfoot.

Good boy, he says, and turns to stare at the next, but then older wolves come, bigger wolves, more and more of them.

Submit, they tell Padfoot, but Padfoot does not submit. He's top dog, no one else.

He growls and barks, and one wolf lunges at him-

A *gigantic* wolf jumps in front of him, protecting him from the others.

No, he orders. *Leave him alone. He hunts with us tonight.*

Padfoot knows his smell. The one that tried to take Moony from him. The Alpha.

Distantly, the human side of him urges him to transform back and grab his wand. Deal with Greyback.

But Padfoot is hesitant.

They're all locked in indecision.

And then they hear the soft noises in the distance. A rapid heartbeat, light hooves on leaves.

Prey.

Padfoot leaps over and goes for it; they're all running after the deer.

Padfoot wants to get to it first.

He doesn't. Wolves from another part of the woods jump on the deer before Padfoot can even see it, but no matter, there's more prey.

Sirius smells their fear, can hear them running, and he gives chase.

He barks, happy. He loves running. He loves competition, and a few howls raise to greet his bark.

His vision locks on the running deer, and Padfoot runs faster, panting, but determined.

Mine, mine, mine.

He lunges, and he makes contact, his teeth sink where he can feel the blood rush the strongest, through hard muscle and soft flesh.

He bites down, blood filling his mouth. The momentum from the speed has him and the deer stumbling over, but Padfoot doesn't let go, even as they toss over the ground.

The deer trashes around, but he just bites harder, and then his pack mates are all around them, biting, and the deer stops trashing. Padfoot feels the moment when its heart stops.

Don't eat, a voice inside his head says, disgusted.

But he's hungry.

Don't eat, for Merlin's sake. You'll regret it tomorrow.

But it tastes good, so Padfoot rips apart a chunk and then he snarls at a wolf that is too close to him.

Wait for your turn, he barks.

A skinny wolf, no one lets him feast. They nip and growl at him, until the poor thing shrinks back, whining.

Sirius buries his snout in that fresh, warm blood and wags his tail.

But his heart isn't into it, something keeps insisting he doesn't eat, and he's annoyed, shakes his head, but the voice persists, so very familiar to him.

He abandons his prey and gives chase to another, joining other wolves.

This prey has big fangs. Wild pig.

They need to coordinate.

A female wolf takes charge and they follow her lead, surrounding the pig, snarling and nipping at its legs, until they bring it down.

Padfoot just moves on between several hunting parties, biting, getting that nice blood over his fur, but not eating.

He finds a couple of cubs. They smell of excitement but of fear, too. Older females are with them, but when Padfoot shows them he just wants to play, that he's no danger to the cubs, they allow him around, and he play fights with the young, letting them climb on him and bite his neck and legs.

Their tiny teeth can't penetrate his thick fur and skin, but he barks in warning from time to time, and they answer back with small, weak howls.

(-)

He wakes up *confused.*

The smell of blood is overwhelming. And there are many people around, that human smell, everywhere, sweat and tiredness, a hundred slow heartbeats-

Padfoot stands, and he discovers he was sleeping between three children, none older than ten or eleven.

Holly fuck, I spent a night with a pack of werewolves.

It's easier to think now, with no wolves in sight.

He'd never lost himself to Padfoot this way. *Never.*

He was always more animalistic, his human mind and thoughts dimmed down when Moony, Prongs and Wormtail were around, but never quite like last night.

He'd chased and killed some rabbits with Moony, as Prongs tried to stop them, but last night, there was no stopping. Padfoot is a predator, and he was surrounded by other bloodthirsty predators. It only amped his own aggression.

Fuck, he thinks, and he extracts himself from the children.

Children, that must have been bitten recently. Muggles, these ones. Padfoot doesn't smell magic on them.

He'd spent the night having fun with werewolves that bite little kids.

They're sleeping now, under the first tentative rays of sunshine, exhausted from their painful transformation.

The trueborns are awake, scattered around the forest, speaking quietly over low fires.

No one pays him any mind.

"He hunts with us tonight," Greyback had announced the other night. In that way animals communicate, far more efficiently than words.

Padfoot walks gingerly. He thinks he stepped into a glass shard at some point during the night.

And he allowed the kids to play too roughly. Tiny teeth, but so many bites still have an effect.

Not to mention the tumble he took with that first deer. His ribs hurt.

There were *many* dears.

And a couple of wild pigs. One almost impaled Sirius with a tusk.

He whines and limps around, using his snout to find his way back to the clearing where his wand must be.

He smells something else.

Wizard. There are many wizards around, but they are tinted with that wolf smell.

One is not. Voldemort.

What the fuck, he stayed here all night?

He smells so strongly of magic. Intoxicating.

Padfoot knows many wizards by smell. He smelled Dumbledore once, when he was sneaking away through Hogsmeade on a weekend night and the teachers were having a glass at the Hog's Head.

And Dumbledore had a stronger scent than all others, magic and power.

But Voldemort is *more.* He smells like storm, thunder, like lightning, like dark magic.

In a way, Voldemort smells like home; like Grimmauld's library.

His heart beat is different, too. Lower than other humans. As low as the sleeping werewolves, but he isn't sleeping. He's standing, leaning on a tree, and Padfoot looks up to meet his gaze as he approaches.

He's always tall, but now he looks a giant, from Padfoot's point of view.

That won't do.

Sirius transforms. He's done this so many times, he can do it without breaking his stance, as seamlessly as McGonagall did, way back in his first year when she performed that trick she likes, going from cat to teacher in one leap.

Of course, McGonagall charms her clothes in place before she does that, otherwise all the first years would get a show they wouldn't be likely to ever forget.

And Sirius learned the spells, too, eventually, only he never uses them.

Because he usually takes his clothes *off* before he transforms. In the Shrieking Shack, or in the places they found when they were out of school.

They all meet up, they get undressed, and transform, waiting for the moon to show up.

But last night- last night he didn't think. All that animal energy around; a hundred werewolves, triggered him, pulling him over the edge, and Sirius is now naked when his fur goes away, his clothes ripped apart from his skin when he transformed.

A woman whistles, sleepily, blinking at Sirius from the ground when he passes by her.

"That's a nice view," she mutters, staring up at Sirius, as he steps right over her. "Pity you're a human, or I'd pull you down to lie with me."

"You can suck it," Sirius spits at her.

She laughs and closes her eyes.

“I would, if you weren’t a human,” she says again.

“Like I’d ever touch a-”

“A what?” A man growls from nearby.

Right.

“A redhead,” Sirius corrects himself, before the word ‘werewolf’ passes his lips.

More sleepy laughter.

Voldemort looks at him from his tree.

Sirius would meet his gaze, unashamed and defiant. Only Voldemort’s eyes keep flickering up and down Sirius’ body, so there is no gaze to meet.

Sirius knows he’s bleeding from several places and that’s probably attracting Voldemort’s attention.

How do I end up in these situations? Sirius thinks, to distract his thoughts and stop the impulse to cover himself with his hands.

He is not a prude, and well, he does make for a nice view, but this is Voldemort, and how the fuck does Sirius always find himself in these situations? Why can’t he be a normal fucking man?

Because it would be boring.

He can image James’ face if Sirius tells him he went to a wedding with the dark lord and ended up killing deer with wolves and then strolling naked through a meadow, with sleepy women catcalling him and whispering about his nice arse, *‘pity it belongs to a wizard’*.

He bursts out laughing.

It’s just too ridiculous. His side hurts, but that only makes him laugh more.

Stop. He can’t. He always laughed at the most inappropriate of times.

When he learned his mother blasted him off the family tree, Sirius laughed for an hour straight, and then he went and told Snape how to enter the Shrieking Shack.

“Morning,” he forces himself to say, sobering up when he reaches Voldemort’s side.

His clothes are unsalvageable, on the floor, strips of cloth.

“Can you accio my wand or something?” Sirius asks, looking around for it.

Voldemort pulls Sirius’ wand from his robe pocket and hands it over, without a word.

Sirius takes it, and it's a struggle to fix his boxers, but it's possible. Not that much material, and a 'Reparo' puts them together, though they look very *flimsy* and ready to break apart.

He's never been good with fixing clothes, like Remus is. He never needed it, rich boy that he was.

Is.

Whatever.

He hastily pulls his boxer on, and he feels a tad better.

"Oh, no. My favourite jacket! It was signed by Freddie, too!"

"Who is Freddie?" Voldemort asks, and when Sirius looks up, this time Voldemort's eyes meet his.

"Freddie Mercury."

Voldemort, obviously, does not know who that is. It's unlikely he goes to Queen concerts or buys their records.

But he's too proud to ask who Freddie is again, so he says nothing, and Sirius doesn't clarify.

Let him hunt that down, like Sirius hunted down Einstein for *months* after Voldemort mentioned him.

It turned out he was a mathematician, to Sirius' great disappointed. Voldemort is such a nerd.

But a useful, overpowered, talented at everything nerd.

He waves a hand and Sirius' leather jacket puts itself together, good as new.

And leather is the toughest to sort out, but of course, nothing is tough for Voldemort.

He was poor like Remus, Sirius remembers. *Maybe even poorer.*

"Thanks," Sirius says, and takes his jacket from where it floats in the air.

"Wait." Voldemort's voice sounds rough. Lower than usual.

It stops Sirius.

"What?"

"You've got a shard of glass in your back."

"Fucking muggles," Sirius sneers. They always throw away beer bottles and strange food wraps in the forest, with no consideration for all the animals that dwell in it.

Well, the muggles that wondered to *this* forest probably encountered a pack of wolves and they ended up either as food, or are now werewolves themselves, and they surely realise how rude it is to throw trash all around them.

Voldemort moves, and he's probably pissed off with Sirius, for transforming and running away with the wolves, forcing him to wait until sunrise in a forest.

You didn't have to wait. I don't need your protection.

Though, of course, he did. If Greyback wouldn't have ordered his pack to accept Sirius, he'd be in several pieces, scattered through the stomachs of the surrounding wolves.

Voldemort must be upset, because he doesn't use his wand to painlessly pull off the glass shard.

He does it by hand instead. Sirius surpasses a shiver when those icy fingers touch his very hot skin.

Sirius is always very hot after a transformation.

He's always very horny after a transformation, because animal brains are very simple- eat, sleep, mate.

Well, Sirius' brain is like that even when he's a human, but still. These instincts are more pronounced immediately after he's been in Padfoot's skin.

Gods, please no. If I get hard with Voldemort here- please, no.

Even for Sirius, that would be too weird.

And Voldemort would probably kill him, despite the remarkable patience he'd had so far in dealing with Sirius' antics.

Those cold fingers do feel good on his heated skin- Sirius looks down at his flimsy repaired boxer, but thank Merlin, nothing seems to be happening down there, and then the shard comes out and the pain kills whatever stupid arousal he had left over from Padfoot.

Voldemort fingers go over the injury next, and it stings, but instantly the skin must heal, because it stops hurting.

"Thanks," Sirius says again, and he puts on the jacket.

That's it. I promise I learned. I will always wear a robe when I go anywhere with him.

When he turns, Voldemort's fingers are stained with his blood.

He's so silent. Tense, like Voldemort never is. He is probably trying very hard not to snap at Sirius.

“I didn’t mean to,” Sirius says, the closes to ‘I’m sorry I almost got myself eaten and forcing you to stay here all night’ he can get. “It just happened.”

“What?” Voldemort asks, after a second, his gaze fixed on his fingers, slick with Sirius’ blood. He sounds distracted.

“The Padfoot thing,” Sirius says, slowly. “It just happened. I didn’t expect it. I’ve never been around so many wolves and I just couldn’t resist the pull.”

Voldemort nods. He looks up at Sirius. “I’m amazed you survived to this age,” he says. “You have no self-control and even less regard to your wellbeing.”

“I’m surprised, too,” Sirius answers, honestly. “But I would have been fine,” he boasts, uselessly. “Last night.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

He knows, but he won’t admit it.

“I’m a big boy.“

“Oh, I saw,” Voldemort says and Sirius’s brain malfunctions for a moment.

He means he saw Padfoot is big? Or Sirius, in all his naked glory?

Surely, *surely*, it’s not aimed at Sirius’ prick.

He starts laughing again, a little hysterical. The thoughts that come to him... How could he even think of that?

“I better go,” he says, because he should, before who knows what utter shit gets past his lips.

Voldemort nods, but he just leans back on the tall tree, staring at Sirius.

Well, alright.

“Ah, thanks. I had fun. Let’s do it again sometime.”

Merlin’s pants, can you stop talking? It’s his stupid childhood, the manners forced into him, the phrases he has ready for a social situation when he’s been invited somewhere and what he needs to say after the event is over.

He usually has no problem stopping this nonsense, but he’s exhausted, and he feels a little vulnerable, injured, almost naked, so his manners rear their ugly head.

He turns on the spot and Apparates before he can do more damage.

“Where were you?” Marlene screams as soon as he’s inside the house. “And why are you naked? What the fuck, Sirius, you promised you won’t-“

“I haven’t fucked anyone,” Sirius snaps at her, and she opens her mouth to argue, perched on the armchair, arms crossed, after probably having waited for him the entire night.

But she must see the blood, because she closes her mouth and her face softens.

She stands and comes closer.

“What happened?”

“I was with Voldemort,” Sirius says and well, that will explain the blood, but won’t explain the nakedness, will it?

Marlene frowns. She comes closer. “You smell like a wet dog.”

He takes off his jacket and throws it on a couch.

“What the-“ Marlene looks at his many scratches and bruises.

“I’m fine.”

She touches his neck, where the cubs- *kids*- bit him repeatedly. Her fingers are warm, unlike Voldemort’s.

They, too, feel very nice.

She smells nice.

She runs her hand down his shoulder, to another big scratch, and the arousal comes back full force.

He pulls her to him and kisses her.

She yelps, tries to shove him away, but Padfoot is still kicking around vaguely in his head, and it’s like the deer the other night. When prey struggles, Padfoot just bites harder.

When pray struggles, it just makes it more exciting.

His poorly repaired boxers snap apart when he grows hard.

“Sirius!” She steps back, shoving him away. “Bath, first. You smell like you slept in dirt with a pack of dogs.”

Right on all accounts, love.

“You’re coming with me,” he growls at her, taking her hand.

She comes, mumbling about filth and injuries and risk of infections and other nonsense.

When Sirius passes by the enormous mirror in his hallway-

He stops and stares.

He has twigs and grass in his tangled hair.

And the blood- *Merlin, the blood!* It's dried and smeared around his mouth and nose, where he bit into those poor deer and pigs.

It's all over his chest, too.

And then his own blood, from his many superficial injuries.

His eyes are bright and fevered, shining from his mostly blood tainted face.

He looks wild, and a part of him, probably Padfoot, likes it.

(-)

"Moody was fitted with a special eye," Sirius says, in a meeting. "Dumbledore said he will find a way to hide my mark. Apparently the eye will see through clothes."

Everyone stares at him.

Sirius wasn't supposed to tell Voldemort about it. Dumbledore said he will find a solution, just to hide from Moody until he does.

But Sirius can't- he *can't* keep that to himself. If Moody will see through clothes, he can bump into Bella one day. Into Lucius.

Into Regulus.

He can meet Barty Junior at the Ministry, there to visit his father. And when Barty will be questioned…. he will have interesting things to share about Regulus.

Lucius's eyes flash with concern. Rodolphus swallows heavily, looking at Bella.

Voldemort's shoulders straighten.

"Is he out of St Mungo?" he asks.

"Not yet. They'll release him next week."

Voldemort stands. "It will be done, by then," he says, and he leaves before anyone can even kneel or anything.

"He'll find a solution," Rodolphus says, still looking at Bella with concern.

"Of course he will." Bella looks unbothered. "Knowing him, he will find one by tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sirius." Lucius meets his gaze, and miracles can happen. A grateful Malfoy.

Sirius feels awful. He truly does. But it was just unfathomable to allow his family to be seen with dark marks.

While just the mark itself isn't yet illegal, it does warrant an interrogation.

It's not like the Order, or the Ministry loses anything. They'll carry on as usual. Sirius simply didn't allow them to use Moody's unfair advantage.

"Yeah," he says, shifting in his seat.

(-)

"How do I look?" Regulus asks, gawking at himself in Sirius's mirror.

"You're not going on a date!" Sirius snaps at him.

Voldemort figured out how to hide the marks from Moody's eye, after Lucius bribed someone in the Hospital to tell him what magic the Head Healer used when creating the eye.

And now every Death Eater has to go to Voldemort in person and have the Mark charmed.

That means Regulus has to see Voldemort. Sirius was adamant that he'd be present when that happens.

"Don't be an arse," Regulus snaps back. "I just want to look presentable."

"When the fuck haven't you looked presentable, proper, stiff little shit that you are? If I barge into your room at three in the morning, you'd still be all put together."

Regulus glares at him.

"Sorry," Sirius says. "I just don't- I don't like you around him."

Something like triumph flashes in Regulus' eyes. "That's why he isn't calling me, is it? Because you don't want me involved?"

"So?" Sirius asks, confrontational. "So what if I don't? You're a baby, you have no place in a war."

He thought Regulus might throw a tantrum; he's not one for tantrums, all calm and collected and cold usually, but he's so obsessed with Voldemort that Sirius is expecting a fight.

"I am not even two years younger than you," he says, but he does not look upset. He looks….happy? "Is that why you joined, then? To…" he blushes, slightly. "To look after me?"

It tugs at Sirius' heart. It makes him remember all those times when they were young, and Regulus would say Sirius is his hero, when he'd trust nothing could happen to him if Sirius was there.

It makes him remember how hard it was, when he ran away and he wasn't there to look after Regulus anymore. It makes him imagine how hurt Regulus must have felt without his big brother there.

"Sort of," Sirius lies. If he'd had known Regulus was a Death Eater sooner, he might have joined for that alone. Might have. "I asked him to keep you out of it."

Regulus nods. "As long as we have a Black there, it doesn't matter which. Our family is represented."

Sirius' jaw ticks. "It was already. Bella-"

"Bella is not a Black anymore."

"She'll always be a Black," Sirius says, harshly.

Regulus shrugs. "She's a woman. She is one of a kind, a special, unusual woman, but she is one at the end of the day, and now she's Rodolphus', not ours."

"Merlin," Sirius sighs. "Do yourself a favour and never say that to her face."

His brother ate all that shit up, about a woman's place in society. About a man's place; about purebloods, and half-bloods, and muggleborns, all in their designated places. Nice and simple.

"I'm not an idiot," Regulus reminds him.

You can be, Sirius thinks, but bites his tongue before he can say it.

"In any case, I appreciate the sentiment, but-"

"You're not fighting," Sirius says. "You never liked to fight."

Not duels, not even heated discussions. Regulus fights with barbed words, with insults covered by compliments, with sneers, with his wealth.

"Typical Gryffindor," Regulus mutters. "This war is not all about duels, Sirius. The real battle, the most important one, will be inside the Ministry."

(-)

“Don’t kneel,” Sirius says, hastily, when they are in Lestrange Manor, handing their outer robes to an elf.

He wouldn’t be able to stand it, he knows; to see his baby brother on his knees.

“Kneel?” Regulus gives him a strange look. “Why would I kneel?”

Good. Good.

Sirius remembers when Voldemort lied to Sirius, when he got his mark.

“Does Dumbledore say I required kneeling?” he’d asked, as if that was an outrageous idea.

It makes sense. This kneeling business must come later in the service. After all, no one would have made his Bella kneel from the get go. Or Lucius.

Especially not Rodolphus.

Voldemort receives them in the living room, seated in that awful skull decorated tall armchair.

Bella stands at his side. She comes to them, when they enter, hugs Regulus, who stiffens, not one for such public displays of affection, and tries to extract himself from it, especially when she tries to run her fingers through his short hair.

She kisses Sirius, who kisses back, and then she invites them to sit, all a smile.

Sirius will never get used to just how breathtakingly beautiful she is. He always loses a moment, when he sees her, trapped in adoration and awe that such a creature exists, and that he’s been lucky enough to be born as her cousin.

They stare at each other adoringly, as they do, until Regulus coughs discreetly, and they snap out of it.

They sit together on the settee, Regulus sandwiched between them.

Voldemort blinks at them, slowly, and Sirius withholds a smirk.

‘The Black cousins’, people would whisper when they’d all show up together.

Bella, Sirius, Regulus and Andromeda, peas in a pod.

“That’s a lot to take at once,” James once joked on a Hogsmeade weekend when Bella and Andy came to visit them at school.

And poor Narcissa, with her Rosier features; Sirius liked to tease her when he’d been young, that her mother must have had an affair, and Narcissa is no Black. He stopped when Bella cursed him so badly, he needed treatment at St Mungo’s.

Bella' eyes are filled with love and trust when she gazes at Voldemort, her posture relaxed, at ease; Regulus' with worship and curiosity, shoulders pulled so tightly back it's a wonder his spine hasn't snapped.

How do I look at him?

"Bella was just telling me about your N.E.W.Ts," Voldemort says, addressing Regulus. "Quite impressive. Congratulation."

His brother preens under the praise, rises his head higher.

Sirius has no idea about any of it, and he's irritated that Voldemort got to learn about it before he did.

"I'm rather in a hurry," he spits. "So if we can get on with it-"

"Sirius," Bellatrix hisses.

Regulus gives him the same look he always used when Sirius would pick a fight with their mother. An exasperated and pleading expression that begs Sirius to just shut up and play nicely.

Voldemort ignores him.

"Are you planning to apply for a position at the Ministry?"

Regulus nods. "Most likely; I have a couple of meetings next week with Lucius and some of his friends."

"You haven't considered the Charms Institute in Egypt?" Voldemort tilts his head, observing Regulus. "Highly prestigious. Very selective; almost impossible to get in. But with your results, you shouldn't have an issue. And especially with your name. I hear your father was the brightest student they had in a century."

Sirius' jaw ticks.

Don't get mad; it would be good- *perfect*- for Regulus to fuck off to Egypt for three years, out of harm's way.

But Sirius is still mad, because *he* wouldn't have been admitted into the Institute, not with eight N.E.W.Ts.

He wouldn't have wanted to go, of course, but somehow he's still annoyed.

Regulus frowns, slightly. "I'm needed here," he answers.

"We need educated, extraordinary wizards," Voldemort says. "There is a long and tumultuous path ahead of us - we would benefit greatly from the knowledge you would gain at the Institute."

You arrogant fool, Sirius thinks; even Bella shifts, uncomfortable. Of course Voldemort would assume Regulus meant he's needed in this stupid war.

What Regulus meant was that their *mother* needs him; she wouldn't take it well to have her second son leave the house. The Blacks need Regulus, since Sirius fucked off, Andromeda left even before him, Narcissa and Bella married.

Regulus, smooth and careful with his words, doesn't hesitate. "I will think about it," he lies.

They spend some time in a one sided conversation, with Bella singing praise to both Sirius and Regulus; Voldemort listens, his eyes shifting between them all, a pensive expression on his face.

Regulus responds when he's directly addressed, but his little brother never talked much- probably because he didn't have the space to talk, what with Sirius never shutting up as they were growing up- so he mostly just stares at Voldemort intently.

Sirius does his best to look at Bella and will themselves out of that situation.

"Are we keeping you from an engagement, Sirius?" Voldemort asks, some half an hour into the ordeal. "If we are, you may leave. Don't be late on our account."

"I'm fine," Sirius says, glaring at a hideous painting.

"Are you sure? You look as if we've taken you captive."

We. What we? You motherfucker. Just charm his mark and let Regulus go.

Sirius does not want his brother there, under Voldemort's red gaze.

"He could never sit still," Bellatrix is quick to excuse Sirius' obvious restlessness. "Our blood is at fault."

"Is that so?" Voldemort sounds amused. "The grounds are vast and the weather is pleasant, Sirius. Why don't you stretch your legs?"

Sirius turns his eyes on him. "I'm fine," he repeats through gritted teeth.

And then he makes a massive effort to relax, to participate in the conversation and appear at ease, because otherwise Voldemort would keep them all there until Halloween, just to spite him.

Voldemort still delays awfully long, and it's amazing how he can talk about nothing for two hours, Bellatrix encouraging him on.

Rodolphus and Rabastan show up at some point, home from wherever they've been.

And then they're all invited to dinner. *Again.* Sirius remembers a time, after his very first meeting with the Death Eaters, when Voldemort refused to eat. But lately he seems to like dinners, even if Sirius has yet to see him actually consume any food.

He was busy looming over Sirius at the last dinner they shared.

Sirius shudders, and tries not to think about it.

With no Lucius in sight, Sirius gets the chair to Voldemort's left, opposed to Rodolphus, who sits, always, on Voldemort's right.

Voldemort does eat this time, slowly making his way through a plate only half filled with salmon and broccoli.

He finally shuts up, but somehow he draws Sirius' attention more when he's silent.

He eats slowly, small, almost delicate bites and it fascinates Sirius for whatever reason.

Probably because Sirius struggles more and more to think of him as just another man.

He's so....so *something* that it's hard to imagine him lowering himself to mundane tasks, like eating. Or sleeping. *Does he sleep?*

Maybe even dark lords are woken up in the middle of the night by the need to piss.

Does he have a very dark, very brooding toothbrush? He can't possibly use a regular one, like regular men, can he? It's probably as black as his soul, with a skull shaped handle.

Does he wank?

Fuck, Sirius, what in all the hells is wrong with you?

A ridiculous question. Sirius would sooner offer to make a list with what is *not* wrong with him. It would take less time.

"Sirius," Rodolphus snaps, taking him out of the very weird train of thought he'd been on.

"Yeah?" Sirius tears his gaze off Voldemort, and turns it to Rodolphus, who looks mighty bothered, for whatever reason.

"Eat," he barks.

"I am touched with your concern over my nutritional needs, *cousin*," Sirius hisses.

"I don't give a fu-"

"You are all so tense today," Voldemort cuts over him. He seems pleased with himself, looking from Sirius to Rodolphus with an amused expression.

(-)

“Why do you have to make everything awkward?” Regulus complains when finally they are out of that house of horrors. “Merlin, the way you were staring at the dark lord… it was creepy, Sirius. You even made Rodolphus uncomfortable.”

“I was not staring at him,” Sirius argues. “I was just lost in my head.”

Regulus’ raised eyebrow expresses doubt all on its own.

“Anyway, I have something to ask, and I thought it prudent to wait until after we were done here,” Regulus says, squaring his shoulders and stopping in front of the Manor’s gates.

I won’t like this, Sirius thinks.

“Mum said she’d like to see you three Saturdays from now. For a cup of tea and cake.”

Something inside him recoils in terror.

Another part of him hurts with joy

“She can send me a fucking invitation, then,” he says.

Regulus rolls his eyes. “You’re her son. You hardly need an invitation to attend her birthday tea.” A glare. “You do remember it will be her birthday, right?”

“No,” Sirius lies. “But now you reminded me. I’ll send her flowers. I’m thinking the Devil Snare, in a nice big, expensive pot-”

“Sirius,” Regulus says, grabbing his shoulder. “Come on. Just an hour. Half an hour. You don’t even have to stay long. Just bring the flowers yourself and then you can run and hide-”

“I’m not hiding-”

“And I suggest a Venomous Tentacula. Much harder to subdue than the Snare. Think about it, will you?”

Regulus Apparates away before Sirius can say anything else.

(-)

“Thanks a lot, mate,” Peter says, as soon as he steps inside the house.

It’s very early. Sirius stretches on the faded pink couch.

“Anytime, Pete.”

“How is she?” Peter throws himself on the couch beside Sirius, unbuttoning his robe.

“We played rummy the entire night. I taught her poker, and she kicked my arse at it and then she went to sleep.”

Peter smiles at him. “Thanks a lot, Padfoot-”

Sirius waves it away. Peter rarely needs someone to stay with his mum at night. He’s not one to spend nights away from home. But when he does, Mrs Pettigrew only seems agreeable to Sirius. She gets confused and scared if she’s left alone with anyone else for prolonged periods.

“So, how was it?” Sirius wiggles his eyebrows. “Did you have *fun*?”

“Don’t be a dog,” Peter says, and inevitably they laugh. He wonders if the pun will ever get old. “She’s alright. I like her.” A short pause. “A lot. But I can tell- I mean, I can’t bring her here or mum- you know how mum gets, she can be overwhelming- and I feel like…I don’t know. It’s going to be an issue, as always.”

Peter’s last girlfriend dumped him because of it.

Sirius makes a face. “If she’s going to have an issue with you choosing to take care of your mum, then fuck her. You’ll find someone that won’t.”

Peter could drop his mum with her sister; the way it used to be before Peter finished school.

But he won’t. He’s adamant that he takes care of his own mother, now that he’s free to do it.

And you couldn’t bare to see your father ill. You ran away like a coward. Like a traitor.

“I saw Lily yesterday. I went to her to help me charm the stains off my shirt,” Peter says. “She looked upset, but she wouldn’t say why.”

“Her period came,” Sirius says and laughs when Peter makes a disgusted face. “Mate, really, you’re not twelve. You have to get used to hearing about periods.”

“She told you that?”

“Nah,” Sirius shrugs. “James did. Well, he said she isn’t pregnant, all disappointed.”

Peter picks up Sirius’ half empty beer bottle and takes a sip. “I don’t know what’s with this hurry to have kids. I mean Lily used to frown at it, called us old-fashioned and backwards, that we marry and have kids so young. And look at her now.”

By ‘us’ Peter means ‘wizards’. By ‘us’ he means magical, and the way he says it, it’s as if Lily isn’t part of ‘us’.

Sirius frowns and he thinks to say something, but then again, Lily did say those things, often and loudly.

She was the one going on about ‘you lot’ when she had to say something critical about wizard customs.

“It’s not her,” he says, eventually. “It’s James. After his parents died, he gave it a lot of thought and he doesn’t want his kid to have old parents, like he did.”

“I want to be there for them,” James told Sirius. *“I don’t want my kid to go through what I did, so young.”*

“Well, yeah, I guess.” Peter takes another sip. “But I mean, with the war and everything- I wouldn’t drop a child in the middle of it.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “It’s not like anyone’s targeting babies, Pete. We can’t put our lives on hold and wait the war out. We don’t know if it will end, or when, or if we’ll be here when it does. So… now is as good a time as any to have a little fucker.”

Peter tenses. He turns to face Sirius fully. “Do you think we’ll win?”

Sirius says nothing.

“Because…it doesn’t feel like it,” Peter goes on, whispering.

No one in the Order accepts talk of ‘what if we don’t win’. *Bad for morale,* Elphias said, shutting down any doubt, reasonable or not, to the point that people are now ashamed to even think of that option.

“I don’t know,” Sirius says, getting tense himself.

“I mean…” Peter looks away. “One has to be blind to not see the writing on the wall. *He* is gaining so much ground.”

The whisper becomes so low, Sirius has to bend towards him to hear him. The terrified whisper.

“I can’t die,” Peter says. “I don’t want to die. I’m twenty!” He sounds strangled. He breathes erratically. “And my mum- who’ll take care of mum-”

“Hey, hey!” Sirius grabs his shoulder. “Calm down.”

“I can’t.” Peter looks up at him, desperate. “I can’t sleep. Every time I close my eyes in my bed- I-”

“You should start drinking more. That’s how I fall asleep.”

“I think about what could happen. What is most likely to happen. To me. To James- Lily! Remus will be forced to join a pack and you….how can you all stand it? You all look so fine, James is out there trying to knock Lily up, Fabian was telling me about his sister, excited over another pregnancy, people have plans for the future- how do you all stand it? I can’t. I just- I think we should have a plan or something. Because we’ll need one. If the Ministry falls, if Dumbledore falls and we’re on his side when that happens, we’re fucked! What do we do? Run? Go to another country? Will we even be allowed to leave, will the borders be opened- why doesn’t anyone plan? I don’t understand?”

“Pete-”

But shy, usually calm Peter can’t shut up now. It seems he’d been bottling it up for a while, because he’s on a roll.

“I get it, alright? We shouldn’t think like that, Dumbledore says this mentality will only ensure Voldemort’s victory, that we need to stay strong and keep hope alive, but *how*? He doesn’t say how! Am I the only one that thinks we do need a plan, in case things go belly up? Is there something wrong with me?”

“Of course not,” Sirius says. “Pete, come on, we’re all shaking in our boots. I bet there aren’t many people in magical Britain that sleep well these days-”

“Well, Death Eaters might,” Peter mumbles.

“They’re in a war, too,” Sirius reminds him. “They could lose, too. They need to have plans in motion-”

Peter snorts. “I don’t know, Sirius. I don’t think they do. I mean- everyday it’s becoming clearer and clearer they might not need any plan. Even if they lose- they can just claim Voldemort made them, that he cursed them or kept their families hostages or what not. And what? I mean, the Ministry won’t torture them or anything. But what will I say if we lose? That Dumbledore made me? That he threatened to have mum killed? No, I can’t say that. And I bet He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named won’t be as civil with us, as the Ministry would be with Death Eaters.”

“Oh, the Ministry would be very *civil,*” Sirius snorts. “They’ll throw the Death Eaters in Azkaban. Truly, I’d rather a torture session and death at Voldemort’s hand’s-” Peter flinches at the name. “- over being locked up with the Dementors.”

Peter slumps back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. “So you- you don’t think we need a plan? You don’t have any plan? Just in case?”

Sirius takes the beer from Peter’s hand. He empties it in one go. “Nah. I don’t think I’ll be around when the war ends. One way or another.” He laughs, harshly. “Really, every day I wake up and I am still alive, it’s a miracle.”

“Don’t say that-”

“Hey, you know me. I’m stupid. I put myself in situations that- well. I don’t anticipate the need for plans in my case.”

Though he does think at night. About what would happen to his family, if the Ministry wins. Or what will happen to his friends, if Voldemort wins.

It’s like he can almost see a giant scale, with the people he most loves balanced on each side, in a very precarious position. And every day the scales tip back and forth.

“You’re-” Peter bites his lip. “You-for a while-” He sighs. “For a while, something’s different.”

Sirius stands. “Why don’t you ask Remus to look over your mum, in that case,” he spits.

“Sirius, I’m not Remus. I’m not ready to think the worst of you. I never was,” Peter doesn’t stand, but he meets Sirius’ eyes, unflinching. “James is suspicious of Remus, lately. But not of you. Even if *you* are the one acting weird. Dumbledore isn’t concerned with your many absences in meetings. You’re spying for him, aren’t you? That’s what happened, when You-Know-Who attacked you, last year?”

“No,” Sirius lies. “Stay out of it, Peter. It’s- I have a special mission from Dumbledore, but it’s not- just drop it.”

“Alright,” Peter nods. “If you say so.” He looks away. “I wish- I know James is- well, I wish you’d trust me as much as you trust him. I never turned my back on you. Ever.”

Sirius sits. He grabs Peter’s shoulder again. “I trust you,” he says, and he means it. He trusts Peter inherently. But Peter is not James. “I just don’t want to endanger you.” Which is also the truth. He wouldn’t have told James, either, but he can’t lie to James. He’d catch on in an instant.

Peter caught on, after all.

Remus did, too. Sirius is an open book to his closest friends. Of course, Remus assumed the worst, but Peter sniffed something is going on, and he’s not as distrustful as Remus. Sirius didn’t attempt to have Peter kill Snape, after all.

Peter makes a depreciative noise. “I’m already in danger, Sirius. We all are.”

There’s no arguing that, so Sirius doesn’t attempt to. He sits there for a few more minutes, and then he leaves without another word.

(-)

“Wait,” Sirius asks, when Voldemort pulls out a vial of Veritaserum from his robe and prepares to pour it in a glass of water. “I- I want to tell you something.”

Voldemort puts the vial down.

“Go on,” he says, after some seconds.

Blacks don’t fidget. Sirius is straight as a rod, stiff in his chair. Bella said not to look at him, to show deference, but- Bella is crazy.

He’s about to say something that will anger the most dangerous man in their country- maybe the world- and how is Sirius supposed not to look at him? How does she expect him to not want to keep the danger in sight?

So he meets those red-brown eyes. He opens his mouth-

And closes it again, heart thundering, hitting against his ribs, making him dizzy.

Blacks aren't afraid.

Whatever Black came up with that line, didn't have to stare down Voldemort, did they? No. Otherwise they'd know Blacks fear, too.

Voldemort looks intrigued, watching Sirius stew in silence, attempting to speak.

He leans forward, puts his elbows on the table, eyes ablaze. "Go on," he says, again.

"You won't like it," Sirius whispers, and fuck, is that really his voice? He sounds like a terrified little kid.

Snap out of it. Maybe Blacks can be afraid, but you aren't.

"I am getting the feeling that I won't," Voldemort agrees. Another couple of seconds pass. "I'm prepared for it," he continues, and he claps his hands together, on the table, as if to stop himself from going for his wand, when he hears whenever Sirius has to say.

"I didn't mean to," Sirius decides to start with that.

You could start with 'I'm sorry'. He could have. It would be prudent. But then, Sirius is not prudent.

"I just-"

Fuck, but this is hard.

Maybe Bella was right. Clearly, she knows what she's talking about. This would be far easier if he wasn't looking straight into Voldemort's eyes.

"I couldn't sleep," Sirius says, and then the words just come out of him. "I couldn't sleep, and I kept staring at the picture, for hours on end."

Tom Marvolo Riddle's picture is still in Sirius' nightstand, in a drawer locked with so much dark magic, maybe only Voldemort and Dumbledore could open it. Marlene often asks what he has hidden there. He told her it's his Death Eater Mask. Which it is. But the mask isn't the reason for the locks.

"I just wanted to know. I wasn't even- not consciously. I got on the bike, and before I knew it, I was riding north on the highway." Sirius breathes in. "I went to Little Hangleton."

Voldemort really prepared himself for bad news, it seems, because he shows no reaction. Nothing. Not even a tick in his jaw, not a spark in his eyes.

"I found nothing there, and I just got more frustrated. So I went to Azkaban."

Still nothing.

“I swear- I just wanted to ask- I went to Morfin Gaunt’s cell, and I asked about you, but he could only talk about the stupid ring-”

And there it is. The ring. On Voldemort’s finger. A finger that flexes. Sirius knows that twitch.

He has it, too, when he wants to grab his wand and curse someone.

“I used Legilimency. I- I kept pushing and pushing. There was something off about -ah- well- a certain memory.” The Riddle murders. “So I pushed harder and then I saw the real one.”

Voldemort stands, one fluid motion. Before he knows it, Sirius is standing, too.

That’s the opposite of deference. Look the fuck away.

But Sirius can’t, especially now that Voldemort’s eyes come alive. *Why are his eyes red?* He thinks a lot about those eyes, about what awful- even by dark magic standards- spells he could have casted to end up that way.

He thinks about why Voldemort can’t cast a Patronus anymore.

“I realised my mistake the moment I broke past the fake memory. But it was too late. Morfin started screaming that he’s innocent, and I didn’t know what to do. Well, I knew what I had to do. So I did it. I killed him.”

Voldemort paces, his fingers curling and uncurling at his side.

Sirius does the best impersonation of a statue. And finally, he takes Bella’s advice, and he looks down and shuts up.

Which was a mistake. The second Sirius takes his eyes off him, Voldemort is right there, in Sirius’ space.

“Sit,” he growls.

Sirius sits. The glass of water and the vial of Veritaserum glide down the table in his direction.

“Drink,” comes the next order.

Sirius pours the potion inside his glass and he downs it in one go.

Voldemort remains at his side, glaring down at Sirius.

The potion doesn’t allow Sirius to lie to himself. He has to admit he’s fucking scared, that he’d wish he could run far, far away.

The potion lets Sirius knows he's not scared of death and torture, but of disappointing Voldemort, of having him think Sirius was not as good or as smart as he thought.

"How did you get past the fake memory?" Voldemort asks.

"I just shoved past it."

"Impossible." Voldemort bends over him, grabs the armrests of Sirius' chair and their noses almost touch. "No one can break my enchantments."

"I am sure no one can. *Now.* But you were a child when you cast those." *Stop, stop, stop!* "A scared, desperate child." *Merlin, SHUT UP.* But the truth serum won't let him stay quiet and Sirius is too nervous to attempt to fight it.

Voldemort bares his teeth at him, in a strangely feral way. Sirius flinches.

"The Aurors just didn't look, since he eagerly confessed, since he already had an unpleasant history with the victims. But it wasn't impossible to break at all. I just pushed past it. Any good Legilimens could have done that."

Voldemort retreats, straightens his back. He looks...surprised. He starts pacing again. He's probably just now realising that he had been just a child, that no matter what he thought himself capable of at seventeen, a very good Legilimens would have had no issues with bypassing the memory charm.

"It was intact, then? No one else saw it before you?"

"It was intact," Sirius says. "I was the first to break it."

He walks back to Sirius' side. He bends again. This time, his fingers grasp Sirius' jaw tightly.

Cold fingers. Strong and unrelenting.

"Have you told Dumbledore about it?"

"No."

"Do you intend to tell anyone?"

"No," Sirius says the truth, because he hasn't even told Bella about what he saw in Morfin's head. He just said he looked inside his head and the man started screaming.

"Why did you do it? After I told you to stop. What do you want to do with that information? Do you think you can hurt me with it?"

"No. No, never. I'd never use that- no," the Veritaserum pulls the words to the surface. "I was just curious." And then the stupid potion betrays Sirius in the *worst* way. "I'm sorry," he says. He *hates* saying 'sorry'.

Especially to a cruel half-blooded killer that has his brother and cousin enslaved.

Voldemort looks a bit more at ease. He lets go of Sirius' jaw.

"Well," he says, and he breathes in, visibly. "Than I suppose you did me a favour by killing him. Who knows when Dumbledore would have decided to pay him a visit."

"What does it matter?" Sirius asks. "You are a wanted terrorist. What does it matter if Dumbledore finds out you killed a bunch of muggles? What's three more? He already knows you are a half-blood, so that's no surprise either-"

"It doesn't matter," Voldemort says, but he glances at his ring, distractedly, as if he isn't aware he's doing it. The ring he stole from Morfin. A ring he doesn't want Dumbledore to think of.

Some well honed instinct in Sirius' brain- Padfoot's animalistic, based on instinct brain- urges him not to look at the ring. Warns him of *extreme* danger if Voldemort notices Sirius glaring at it.

So Sirius is back to staring at his face.

A long time passes. Minutes that feel like years. Sirius is feeling nauseous.

"What picture?" Voldemort asks.

"Huh?"

"You said you were looking at a picture; that it made you go to Little Hangleton."

"Your picture," Sirius says, unable to stop the words. "It was in the file I gave you. I kept it."

"Why?"

Sirius blinks at him. "I don't know," he says, truthful. "I couldn't let go of it."

"Has anyone else seen it?"

"No. It's locked in my nightstand. It's safe." He bites his lip to shut up, but that's no help with Veritaserum, and Sirius is far too anxious to even attempt to Occlude. "I just wanted to know what happened to you, to turn you like this. I wanted to know what happened to your mother, if maybe she's responsible."

"Not all of us have mummy issues," Voldemort snarls at him.

"I don't have- aghhh" Sirius can't say it. He can't lie.

"Will you stop, now? Will you stop looking into my past?"

"I don't know," Sirius says. "I-maybe. I found out that she died by the time you went to Hogwarts."

"How?" Voldemort narrows his eyes.

Don't. Do not say it.

The Veritaserum is strong, but not as strong as Sirius' *need* to protect his mother.

He refuses to say it. He gets dizzy. Sick. Vomit raises up his throat. He starts shaking, sweating. He feels like he will die, but he *won't* say it.

He didn't even realise he'd closed his eyes, that he'd laid his head on the table- banging his head on the table, really- until Voldemort's fingers twist in his hair, holding his head up.

He's bent down over Sirius again, very close.

And he proves he knows Sirius very well, when he guesses what makes him fight the Veritaserum so much. When he connects the dots about who could have shared that information with Sirius.

"Did you go home, Sirius?" he asks, softly.

He guessed already. Just say it. End the pain and say 'yes'.

But Sirius won't. He can't implicate his mother, even if he already did. He tastes iron in his mouth, copper- bitter. Blood. He's bitting his tongue so hard, he's almost bitting through it.

Voldemort shoves his other hand in his robe, and it comes out holding another vial. The antidote.

He pushes it past Sirius' clenched jaw and-

Instant relief. And *pain.*

Sirius was choking on blood. He wrenches away from Voldemort and spits out the blood, that is also on his chin.

He stumbles out of his chair and finally gets some space from Voldemort.

"You resist the potion well, when it is most important for you," Voldemort says, watching Sirius casting a healing charm at his tongue. "Well done."

Sirius tries to breathe normally, to calm his heart.

"Of course, it was obvious you were hiding something at the end, so we will need to work on that."

Are we just going to pretend the Morfin thing didn't happen?

Well, Sirius is all for pretending. Only-

"She didn't tell me. It was my fault. She never speaks of you, I just forced it out of her-"

Voldemort snorts. "If I wanted to kill your mother, she'd be long dead." A brief pause. "If I *could* kill your mother," he corrects, "she'd have been long dead. But she was Orion Black's

wife, and then she was Bellatrix' aunt, and now she is your mother. She is quite safe from me, Sirius. Safer than anyone else in this country, no matter what insults and secrets come out of her mouth."

Sirius nods, very relieved. He isn't upset to learn Voldemort would want to kill his mum, if only it wouldn't ruffle too many feathers. He understands the urge. Sirius sometimes wants to strangle her. And he can only imagine how she treated Voldemort in their youth, if she treated Sirius, her brightest star, her own pure, precious blood the way she had.

He's just comforted to hear she's safe, despite all that.

"I'll see you next Tuesday. Go."

Sirius hurries past him.

When he Apparates away, he can't believe Voldemort, even as angry as he'd been, had not asked Sirius any dangerous questions. He kept them all related to the Morfin situation; he kept them all about himself.

That's quite-

Sirius doesn't know what to think about it.

"Sir! It is late for visits, sir!" Dobby informs him, as Sirius strolls past the front door, and up the grand stairs.

"Sir, Master won't like this-"

"Oh, he will not," Sirius snarls.

Another elf- or maybe the wards- alerted Lucius, because when Sirius is on the first floor, he sees Lucius coming out of a room, in a sleeping robe, hair disheveled.

"What happened?" he asks, face hard and blank, but his wand is in his hand.

"I told him," Sirius says, with relish. "About Morfin. So you can shove your blackmail up your arse."

Lucius, instead of being angry, comes closer, eyes wide. He grabs Sirius' shoulder.

"Are you alright?" he asks, softly, looking up and down Sirius' body, searching for injuries. He finds the blood on his chin. "I have some pain relief potions- Merlin, Sirius, why did you tell him? I wouldn't have."

"And now you owe me," Sirius says, shoving's Lucius' protective arm off him. "You owe me, because I didn't tell him you knew about it and kept it from him."

"Finally leaning into your Slytherin side, I see. Of course, with a dash of stupid Gryffindor bravery. I can't believe you went ahead and told him. Come, I have the potions in my office-"

“I don’t need any fucking potion!” Sirius screams, because he’s so *frustrated.*

Lucius isn’t supposed to be worried about Sirius’ well being. They’re all supposed to hate him for leaving. For being a traitor. They weren’t supposed to welcome him back so easily.

Sirius isn’t supposed to feel at home with these people that refused to talk to him for the past years. People that he hurt when he abandoned them.

They aren’t supposed to forgive him, before he even apologises. No one on the other side forgives him, besides James and Peter. And even with James, he was not forgiven easily when he sent Snape to the Shack.

Voldemort isn’t supposed to be this patient with Sirius.

“I’m fine! I told you I am not afraid of him, and I meant it. I have a spine, unlike others.” He turns around, goes down the stairs, and leaves, angry and confused.

It’s only when he gets home that he allows his hands to shake. He can’t stop once he gives into the urge.

He sits on his couch, in the dark, and trembles.

Chapter End Notes

From now on things will start escalating rather quickly.
I am sorry for the delay, as always. I just have too many stories going on.
Thank you for reading and please, if you have the time, share your thoughts with me.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

brief mentions of homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Voldemort called me to charm my mark," Sirius tells Dumbledore. "He wasn't particularly forthcoming, but I understand he has a spy or an acquaintance in St. Mungo's and he received warning there were special charms placed on Moody's fake eye."

He isn't even lying that much. Lucius does know a Healer in St Mungo's that gave him the list of charms used on Moody. Of course, that was only after Sirius told Voldemort such charms exist, and Voldemort demanded Lucius investigate the matter.

"So you don't need to find a way to hide mine from Moody and his creepy eye," Sirius continues, meeting Dumbledore's gaze.

Dumbledore pinches the bridge of his nose; it's unusual for him to look so frustrated. But the war is going so badly, Sirius can't blame him.

"I imagined he'll get word of it, eventually. He has spies everywhere. But I hoped we'd at least have some time before he found out."

Then you shouldn't have sent me to spy on my family. Not that Dumbledore knows Sirius' family members are Death Eaters. Or he doesn't know *for sure*.

He shifts in his chair. "Rodolphus insists I spend more time with him," he says.

In reality, Rodolphus looks pained whenever he sees Sirius around. It's the oddest of things. He can stomach Sirius just fine, if Voldemort isn't there, but if the dark lord shows up...Rodolphus looks like he wants nothing more then to keep them apart.

Must be that crazy competition going on between Death Eaters to become the favourite in Voldemort's eyes.

Though that would be stupid, wouldn't it? Rodolphus has nothing to worry about. He is Voldemort' right hand man, his most trusted.

At least from the younger crowd. Bella made some comments that there are older people in their inner circle, and that they enjoy Voldemort's trust, too.

“And I figured I should. I’m sure at least some of his friends must be Death Eaters, too. Voldemort won’t slip up their identities, but Rodolphus might.”

Dumbledore nods.

“And- well. I’m worried.” Sirius swallows, nervous. He isn’t sure this is wise. But he has to do something. Just in case a miracle happens, and the Ministry wins the war.

“About?” Dumbledore’s eyes are intense, fixed on Sirius’ own.

“My cousin- Bellatrix. She’s acting oddly.”

Dumbledore frowns. “In what way?”

Sirius hesitates, trying to pick the best words.

“She was always a tad…” Dumbledore coughs. “Odd.”

Go fuck a hippogriff, you old wanker. “Yeah-well. No. I mean- She’s very…docile.”

Dumbledore blinks. “That does not sound like her.”

Sirius nods. “Precisely. I have the feeling she’s afraid. And not many things frighten Bella, but she’s so careful around Rodolphus. I’m worried he’s doing something to her. That he hurts her, or maybe douses her with a potion or the Imperius- I don’t know. I don’t like it.”

Dumbledore leans back into his chair. “There is suspicion within the Auror department that Rodolphus is offering Voldemort shelter.”

By this point, almost everyone knows Rodolphus is a Death Eater. But they can’t prove it, and no one will authorise an Auror raid to his manor without good cause. No one will issue an arrest warrant without proof.

“I don’t know how well you know Bellatrix-”

Dumbledore smiles. “I had her in my office on a regular basis during her education. She was quite a troublemaker.”

Sirius snorts. “Yeah. We were somewhat close.” The understatement of the century. “She was the only one that didn’t turn her back on me when I left the family. She always helped me out. She never cared that I’m friends with muggleborns or blood-traitors or anything.” She did care. The *lectures* he’d had from her during the years….but Bellatrix never took it too seriously. She never believed Sirius actually cherishes *‘that sort of people’*. “Bella is like me- a tad rebellious. She felt just as suffocated back home, under all that scrutiny. You know girls have it bad in the Twenty-Eight.”

“I know.” Dumbledore looks saddened. “And I do remember Bellatrix hated any sort of authority. Especially male authority. Why, she even hated Horace, but I recall she was more receptive to advice from Minerva.”

Isn't that just perfect?

"Yes. She truly does not like bowing down to men. *Any* man. But she loves Narcissa so much, that Bella could never make herself run away and leave Cissy unprotected. So she stayed, and she was forced to marry Rodolphus, who, as you know, is fanatical about keeping old traditions alive, and keeping women in their rightful place. At home, with the children."

While Rodolphus is a nutter, hell bent on blood purity, he would never dream of locking Bella up. But Rodolphus' reputation is so vicious, everyone is ready to think the worst of him.

Dumbledore is no exception. He nods.

"I'm afraid he's making her - I don't know. Receive Voldemort in her house, or talk to him, or- gods only know what. I don't know how to help her. I don't even know if she's aware of what is happening, or if she's being controlled by magic into being an accomplice of some sort."

Dumbledore runs his fingers down his beard. "I don't think Voldemort would brand her. He'd lose support from his high-ranking men if he takes a woman in his army."

Did he? Did marking Bella cause Voldemort any issue with the few men that are aware she's a Death Eater?

"Still, I worry she's made to do things, insignificant enough- yet sufficient to get her in trouble, down the line. With the Aurors."

"Look more into it. Get closer to Rodolphus and try to gauge what's happening there. I am sure that once we arrest him, she will be able to prove she was under duress. Most Ministry workers know already that women don't have much choice in those circles, but I will remind them, when the time comes." His eyes soften, and he leans forward, elbows on the desk. "I will speak out for her, when the time comes."

Sirius breathes in, relief relaxing his shoulders. "Yeah. I'll find out more."

He just needed to plant this in Dumbledore's head, now. Just in case Bella gets caught. And her reputation, her known hate for men, should give credence to the claim that she would never willingly bow down for one, especially a man that fights to keep the old ways alive.

No one will believe Voldemort promised her to help women, once he is in power. No one will believe someone like Rodolphus would agree to that plan.

He hopes it will work out. He wants to make sure Bella will be safe, no matter who wins.

(-)

“What are you looking for, again?”

“I’m not sure,” Sirius mumbles. He’s been in the store for about half an hour already, walking aimlessly between the shelves. “Something… nice,” he adds, lamely.

The shop keeper gives him an exasperated look. “Nice as in?”

Sirius shrugs. The woman is getting more frustrated. “You’re Sirius Black, right?” she continues, almost accusatory.

He nods.

“Alright. Then I’ll go ahead and guess you’re looking for a ‘sorry I was an arse’ type of gift.

“You could say that,” he agrees.

“What are we working with here? Didn’t show up for a date?” She pulls out a goblin made mirror, adorned with jewels.

He shakes his head, and she puts the mirror down, moves to another shelf. “Cheated?” She picks up a pair of diamond earrings. “Or- cheated with her best friend?” she picks a necklace to go with the earrings and holds them up for inspection.

“No. That won’t do.”

He can’t give his mother jewellery. Can he?

Excuse me, miss, do you have something for ‘sorry I am a failure of a son, but you’re also a bitch of a mother? Sorry I ran away, but also I fucking hate you?’ That would be great, thanks.

The woman moves on to another shelf. “Did you perhaps curse one of her family members?” she shows him a bracelet that possibly costs as much as his house.

Fuck, don’t I have a lovely reputation?

“I sort of stabbed her brother,” he says, thinking of that awful last diner in Grimmauld.

“Morgana’s tits, how does anyone put up with you?” she asks, giving him a vicious glare.

“Must be my devilish good looks,” he answers. “And I’m told I have a nice arse.”

“You’re not flirting your way into a discount, Black,” she warns, pointing a finger at him.

“She’s old-fashioned,” Sirius says, moving to look through a glass case at several displayed items.

The woman snorts. “Found yourself a nice, proper blood-purist?”

“She’s a blood purist, yeah,” he agrees, absentmindedly.

“Then you better go to Knockturn for that type. I hear Borgin and Burke’s has some medieval torture devices on sale.”

“Trust me, she doesn’t need to use devices for torture. She’s perfected the art on her own.”

“That’s just-”

“That one,” he says, pointing at a snow globe.

A miniature witch is playing with a young boy in the snow. She takes him in her arms, twirls him around, and then puts him back down, only for the circle to start up again.

“Have you gotten someone pregnant, Black? Gods protect us!”

(-)

“Are you drunk?” Regulus asks as soon as Sirius steps inside Grimmauld.

“Why? Do I look drunk?”

He’s already feeling extremely self-conscious, had taken an hour to get dressed, going through five robes before finally settling on one. He shoves his brother out of the way to look into a mirror.

“You look dashing,” the mirror purrs at him, but then the damned thing is charmed to always compliment a Black.

He looks alright. Perhaps paler than usual, and his left eye is twitching for some unknown reason, but he doesn’t look drunk.

“You don’t, but I just can’t believe you showed up sober.”

“Actually, I just came to drop this.” He pushes the wrapped gift into Regulus’ chest.

He can’t do this. He doesn’t imagine how he thought he could. Just being inside the hallway and he lost his nerve already, his stomach all in knots.

Regulus steps away, without taking the gift. “Come on, just five minutes. You say hello, give her the gift and then you can leave.”

Sirius shakes his head. “No,” he whispers. “I can’t go in there.”

“You’ve been here a few weeks ago-”

Yes, but he’s been half dead, cursed, and missing a pint of blood. It was different.

“Regulus? Who is that?”

Her voice drifts down the hallway and Sirius flinches.

“Bye,” he says, and grabs the doorknob, but Regulus’ fingers curl around his forearm, iron tight, and he drags Sirius after him.

“So much for Gryffindor bravery,” he sneers.

“You little-“

“Regulus, who’s at the door?”

Oh, fuck.

“Lucius will be grateful to see you. Mum’s been picking on him non-stop.”

But now she’ll be picking on Sirius.

He takes a deep breath and follows Regulus through the hallway to their smallest formal dining room.

He remembers Walburga Black’s birthdays as glamorous affairs, held up in the ballroom on the third floor, the house filled with people.

Sirius vaguely recalls her smiling, dressed in colourful robes, dancing with her husband. Once, she lifted Sirius in her arms and danced with him, when he kept getting between her feet, jealous of any man that danced with her that wasn’t his father. A very distant memory. Regulus was just a baby then, unable to stand on his own.

The memories with her dressed solely in dark green, unsmiling and severe, are fresher. She detested the celebration, she didn’t want to be there and neither did the hundred of guests. But his father wanted it, and everyone did what Orion Black wanted.

Now there is no one to force her to have people over, and no one to force people to actually stand in her company. Well, apparently Narcissa forces Lucius, but that’s the extent of it.

“Just so you know, I didn’t have the chance to let her know you’re coming,” Regulus says hastily, just before he opens the door.

“What?” Sirius hisses, turning cold. “You said she invited-“

The door opens.

“Look, mum! A surprise!”

She does look surprised. For a fraction of a second, Sirius imagines she looks pleased.

But then she’s back to scowling, all dressed in black, her hair tied back so harshly, pulling her face in a way that is sure to induce a headache. It makes her look older than she is, seated on an an ancient yet still impressive armchair.

I'm going to kill Regulus. Sirius can't believe he's been played like this.

"Sirius!" Narcissa stands, and Sirius had never seen her so expressive. At least she is happy to see him.

Lucius blinks twice in rapid succession, which would be nothing on anyone else, but it is the equivalent of a wide opened jaw.

Narcissa is upon him, hugging him warmly. She even kisses his cheek. Sirius clings to her for a few seconds, needing courage.

Bella isn't there, but he didn't expect her to be. He knows she hadn't spoken to his mother since Sirius left, blaming her for driving him away.

Lucius stands, and Sirius heads over to him, shakes his hand.

And then there's nothing else to do but look at his mother.

Fuck, I didn't bring flowers, he thinks just as he sees the ridiculous bouquet in a vase on the table, certainly brought by Lucius.

She does look older; whether it is the all black attire, the hairdo, the lack of makeup-whatever it is, she looks older in a way Sirius hadn't noticed when he'd showed up bleeding to death, when it was just them in his room.

She aged rapidly once his father's health declined. And now-

"You broke my mistress' heart. Her hair turned white after you left," Kreacher said.

Her hair isn't white, but there are grey streaks through it, here and there.

The suspense in the room is suffocating; it is his impression no one even breathes in it. Sirius waits, tense as a spring.

Finally, she extends a hand, lazily.

Sirius bends and takes it, kissing her fingers.

When he straightens his back, he conjures a single red rose with just a flick of his wrist and offers it to her.

She takes it.

"I raised you better than this," she drawls. "A rose is a courting gift. For relatives, you go with orchids. I suppose it's just a habit for you, though. One hears you've been courting half the country."

Sirius grinds his teeth together, willing himself to stay quiet.

"Sit," she orders, eerily similar to Voldemort.

Sirius hastens to obey with far more urgency than he does with Voldemort.

He plants himself next to Narcissa, to draw some comfort.

She's a veritable ice queen usually, but not when it's just family. Even so, she'd never been so touchy. She takes Sirius's hand in her lap, like Bella would have done if she'd been there.

"Happy birthday," Sirius says, and he puts the present on the table.

His mother glares at him, eyes he sees in the mirror every day glinting from underneath perfectly sculpted eyebrows.

"How is Arcturus?" Lucius inquires, just to break the silence. From all of them, Lucius is the one most likely to be in regular contact with the old man, after all.

"Not dead, sadly," Sirius' mother says, with regret, and another tense silence falls over them.

Even diplomat Lucius can't turn that around.

It's not just the silence that's pressing on Sirius, making him feel smaller and smaller with every passing second. It's the house itself, walls closing in, memories of better days playing in his mind until he feels he can't breathe-

"Kreacher!" A harsh snap of his mother's fingers gets him back to reality. He's not small. The house isn't collapsing on his head, burying him alive.

"Mistress," Kreacher appears at her side, bowing low.

"We have a guest. Bring him a drink."

Kreacher doesn't turn to look at Sirius. "What is the guest be having?"

"Look at me," Sirius snaps at him, happy to have someone to yell at.

Regulus tuts beside him, reproachful.

Kreacher cannot disobey a direct order, so he turns and stares at Sirius with quite impressive hatred for a creature so small.

"Firewhiskey. And if you spit in it, I'll take your head and hang it beside your wretched parents on the wall."

Kreacher narrows his eyes. "It would be an honour for Kreacher to be with Kreacher's parents. Kreacher is a dutiful son."

"You little shi-"

"Go," his mother cuts over Sirius and Kreacher pops away. And then she turns on Lucius, insulting him with every other word that comes out of her mouth, resuming a conversation they must have been engaged in before Sirius showed up.

Sirius breathes, relieved, as Lucius smiles through it all, agreeing with her on every asinine claim.

He tries to make his drink last- he well remembers the terrible fights they used to have whenever his mother would catch him going through the liquor cabinet, so he knows she doesn't approve. But he quickly discards the idea when his mother empties *two* glasses in quick succession.

That's new. She never used to drink before, no more than a glass of wine at dinner, here and there.

He turns to Regulus, one eyebrow raised. Regulus shrugs and bends closer to him.

"It's been like that for a while now," he whispers.

Sirius suddenly remembers the bottle of firewhsikey in his old room, sitting on his nightstand. He remembers being confused and panicking for a second, having the impulse to hide it before he realised he doesn't live there anymore and the bottle certainly wasn't his.

Half an hour and a few glasses later, Kreacher brings them cake.

Or he brings everyone *else* cake. He brings a sad, over-baked muffin to Sirius.

"We ran out of cake," he says, boldly holding Sirius' gaze. "Kreacher didn't plan for the uninvited guest."

"Kreacher," Regulus admonishes, holding Sirius' shoulder to make sure he won't attack the stupid elf.

"He can have mine," Narcissa intervenes, pushing her plate in front of Sirius. "I am watching my figure."

Kreacher is not happy with it. "Mistress Cissa, Kreacher just remembered there is more cake. Your figure is too slender. Mistress needs to eat more!"

"And you were laughing at Dobby," Lucius snorts. "He never disrespects me like this, no matter how crazy he is."

He gets nasty glares. They all love Kreacher in that house, and don't take lightly to anyone insulting the foul elf. It's only Sirius that despises him.

Even his stone cold father had some fondness in his tone for Kreacher, sometimes more than he could muster for Regulus.

Sirius eats his cake, to keep his mouth busy. His mother hadn't said a word to him so far, not even a passive-aggressive remark, and he should be glad. Really, he should. If they don't speak, they can't fight.

He isn't glad. He's irritated. The child inside him is screaming, demanding her attention. When he's done with his slice, he takes Narcissa's too, just to have something to do, just so

he won't cause a scene.

It's just *weird*, how she ignores him. She never could, before. Sirius never lacked for attention in that house. He lacked understanding; he lacked choices, physical affection, kind words, he lacked many things, but never her attention. They couldn't get through five minutes together in a room before they forgot anyone else was there and ripped into each other until one of them gave up and stepped away, not before something lay broken on the floor.

"You've bored me enough for one evening," his mother says, finally, after the cake is gone.

She stands.

"Lucius, I'll see at Yule, and not a day sooner. Narcissa, you'll come over for tea next month."

"Yes, auntie," Narcissa accepts. She and Regulus, the lickspittles, always the perfect children that can do no wrong.

They fake kiss each other, in that silly way women do, lips kissing the air around the other's cheek.

Those grey eyes turn to him, at last. "Sirius, you'll come to dinner Sunday. Six o'clock. Do not be late."

Before anyone can say anything else, she's out of the room, in a swirl of robes.

"Thank Merlin it's over," Lucius says, shoulders sagging, pulling at his tie. "Your mother is-"

"What?" Regulus asks, eyebrow raised.

"Yes, I'd like to hear it, too," Sirius hisses.

"What a delightful family," Lucius mutters, but he backs off when Narcissa levels him with one of her icy glares.

"Wasn't so bad, was it?" Regulus asks on their way to the front door.

"You dirty liar," Sirius snaps at him, but his brother doesn't look bothered. "I am not coming Sunday, just so you know!" he adds, before he Disapparates away.

Magic spits him outside the Lestrange Manor's gates. Sirius marches through the grounds, hoping he'll find her home.

And he does.

The elf- and Sirius really needs to learn her name, since she's always at his house, too- lets him in without questions, points him to the living room, where Bella is sitting on a settee, knitting.

He throws himself beside her, shoving her balls of yarns and the shawl she was working on away, laying his head on her lap.

“Oh, dear. What did you do now?” she asks, putting her needles aside, running a hand through his hair.

“I went to see mother.”

“Ouch.”

“I need whiskey. A gallon of it.”

Bella laughs. “No, darling. Your mother is like a Dementor; she sucks the joy right out of you. Chocolate is much more efficient against Dementors, so let me get you some-”

“She even looks like one, now,” Sirius mutters, turning on his side and burying his face in her stomach, closing his eyes. “All dressed in black.” He swallows. “And with those skeletal fingers.” Out of nowhere, he feels tears gathering behind his eyelids, and he wants to *scream*. “She lost so much weight,” he whispers, and even his voice sounds off. “It was her birthday,” he adds stupidly.

“I know,” Bella whispers back.

“She looks old.” The tears somehow fall through his closed eyes, and he just huddles more into her, the leather of her corset rough on his face, but he doesn’t care. He just wants to hide away from everything. “She looks *frail*.”

Bella says nothing, her fingers soothing on his head, her long nails scratching his scalp lightly. After a while, she starts humming a lullaby he liked as a kid.

Bella was a much better mother. To her sisters, and to Sirius. She never ignored their petty complaints, she was always so affectionate, she had soft words for all of them, and held them in her arms, kissed any minor bruise they had to make it better.

She’d read or make up stories for Sirius, up on the rooftop, rocked him to sleep many times, sneaked into his room and held his hand when there was a thunderstorm raging outside and she was the only person in the world to know he was afraid of the loud noises.

And she always made Sirius feel better; even now, as the minutes pass, the heavy feeling in his chest gets less crushing, the knot in his throat dissolves.

He’s emotionally exhausted, drained, and now that he feels safe and loved, he’s starting to doze off into sweet oblivion, when he hears a door opening and then closing.

Must be Rodolphus returning home.

“No,” he protests. “Send him the fuck away.” He throws a hand on the floor until he finds the shawl she was making, and he pulls it over his head.

The footsteps are getting closer, and Sirius is getting angry- can't he have one moment of peace on this fucking earth?

What's worse, he hears Rodolphus' voice, and while he is in the habit of talking to himself sometimes, it's more likely Rabastan is there, too, and Sirius just wants to be alone with Bella.

And then, the worst thing happens.

"My lord," Bella says above him. She tries to stand, but he clings on to her.

"Can't deal with him and mother in the same fucking day," Sirius groans in her stomach.

"No need, Bella," *his* voice comes, and she stops trying to stand or kneel or whatever she meant to do. "I can see you're… busy."

"What did he do now?" Rodolphus' growl comes. "How drunk is he?"

Sirius takes the shawl off his head and turns his neck to glare at Rodolphus, but Bella pulls the shawl back on, before Sirius has a chance to speak.

"He just had a rough day," she explains.

A long-suffering sigh coming from Rodolphus. "When doesn't he? My lord, would you mind continuing our talk in the office, so we don't disturb the baby?"

"Suck my-"

Bella's hand covers Sirius' mouth, on top of the shawl, her other hand on his shoulder, keeping him from standing.

Sirius pulls at her hand, because she's suffocating him; not that it would be a bad way to go, really. Dying in her lap, by her hand, is far preferable than any other death he could suffer.

She lets him go, and pulls off the shawl, but by then they're already alone again.

He stands.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," he says, though he'd like to get smashed in a muggle pub. "Marlene is probably waiting for me."

There's a tick in her jaw. She crosses her arms and glares up at him. "You've been spending a lot of time with that harlot lately. And now she's in your house without you there."

He rolls his eyes. "I thought you, of all people, would know better than to call girls whores just because they don't fit into the standards-"

“I’ll call her what she is. A fucking insipid, graceless slut, that has no business waiting for you or demanding explanation regarding your whereabouts.”

“Come on, Bella-”

She stands. “She’s taking advantage of you.”

Sirius throws back his head and laughs. *Really.*

“She is. You don’t want a relationship; you’re wild and a whore yourself, but she keeps pushing and pushing, and now she’s found herself in your house. My elf says her clothes- if one can call those clothes- are in your dresser. She’s moving in with you and you don’t even notice it. She knows what she’s doing, the ugly bint.”

It’s true that lately Sirius keeps finding her stuff all over his place. And when was the last time she slept at her own house?

He frowns.

“Aunt Lucretia hates her; she’s been saying to some old crones that she’s happy Gideon is finally free of McKinnon, but now she’s got you in her clutches.”

“You speak to Aunt Lu?” Sirius stares at her.

“Of course I’m not talking to that blood traitor. But my mum talks to Euphemia, and Euphemia talks to Miriam, who talks to Lucretia.”

Sirius’ head spins. Voldemort is really missing out on a huge army here. He should collect all these old hags; they are undefeatable and they know everything that goes on, everywhere, at all times.

“I’m not done,” Bella shrikes after him, when he turns to leave.

But Sirius is done with Black women for the night, so he ignores her and makes his way out of the Manor.

(-)

When did it get so colourful in here? he wonders the next day, staring into his bathroom cabinet.

It’s full of lipstick and feminine elixirs and hygiene products.

He plans to have a conversation with Marlene about it. A mature, calm conversation. Tactful.

Of course, what comes out of his mouth when he shakes her awake five minutes later is ‘“When are you going back to your place?”

They have a tremendous fight, and Marlene is at her most terrifying when she’s woken up before noon on her day off.

“You’re not my girlfriend,” he keeps repeating, over and over again, what he’s been telling people for the past year. But then why is she living in his house, why is she coming with him on dates with the Potters, why is she always there, and most importantly why hadn’t he fucked anyone else in what feels like a long time?

Why had he promised to be faithful?

“I’m so sick of this shit, Sirius!” She pulls on a pair of muggle jeans, face red, hair messy. “One step forward, ten steps back! Make up your damn mind already! You want me or you don’t, but pick something and stick with it! If you want me to leave, you only need to say it, but then you can’t go around cursing men I date in a fit of jealousy.”

“So now you’re blackmailing me!”

“Blackmailing you?” she yells back, getting in his face.

It’s just not *fair.* They were having fun, they got along well, kindred spirits in the stuffy, serious Order, and now she’s giving him ultimatums.

Distantly, he knows she’s right. But he wants to go back to just having fun. He wants her to be there, in general, but not there in his house.

Why? You like her. It’s good to have her close. They get along great when they aren’t fighting over their *relationship*, or over Sirius telling people they aren’t really together.

She’s throwing her clothes in a transfigured trunk, trembling with anger, furiously wiping tears off her face.

“I’m fucking done! Should have listened to everyone around me.”

“That’s my jacket-” he tries to say when she throws some of his stuff inside her trunk.

“Once I’m out of that door, that’s fucking it!” She picks out his jacket and throws it at him. “I swear, this is the last time.”

He chickens out, panic seizing him around the time she’s collecting her stuff from the bathroom.

He doesn’t want her crying. He hates to see her suffering, especially stoic, tough Marlene.

And he doesn’t want her gone.

He doesn’t want her in his house, either.

He wants to go back to how they were, but that's apparently not an option, so he has to pick one or the other.

Somehow, he ends up convincing her to stay, even if a small part of him thinks *'you were so close to freedom, what are you doing?'*.

"I know you're under a lot of pressure," she says later, in bed, her fingers tracing his dark mark. "I know your family fucked you up and you have no idea how to compromise, but you have to understand you can't keep doing this to me. The constant back and forth is killing me."

He kisses her, to shut her up, to avoid apologising, to avoid talk of feelings. He just came, but he thinks he can go again- anything to make her shut up.

(-)

Peter looks less spooked when they go out for a beer; he seems to have calmed down from their last talk.

He and James listen to Sirius complaining about Marlene and their situation.

"I don't understand what's the problem," James says. "You clearly love her; I mean, beside Mary, this is the first time you've been with someone for longer than a week."

"Mary?" Sirius frowns at him, making Peter laugh.

James closes his eyes in mock exasperation. "Mary Macdonald. Your first girlfriend."

"Oh, *Mary*." Sirius waves it away. "I was just too young to realise you don't have to stay with them after you shag them."

"You're awful!" Peter shakes his head. "And so lucky you're handsome."

"You always seem to be having a great time with Marlene," James points out. "She gets your stupid jokes- and mine, by the way- she puts up with you, you put up with her which is frankly surprising. I don't know what your issue is."

Sirius bites his lip. He doesn't know himself. "Weren't you-" he coughs, leans closer and lowers his voice, because it's *embarrassing*. "Weren't you scared at the prospect of living with Lily? Like for good?"

James shakes his head. "No. She's the one for me, mate."

"But how did you know that?"

James shrugs. "I just did. I felt it. I don't know how to explain it."

Sirius doesn't feel *it*. He doesn't know if James is just being poetic or if one really is supposed feel something.

"I'm so young," he grumbles. And he could die *any day.* "It's just seems like such a loss to give up on everyone else out there in the world."

"I don't want anyone else," James says. "You could bring me the most beautiful witch in the world and I would only want Lily."

Yeah, that's definitely not the case with me. In fact, Sirius tries very hard as they speak not to look at a girl that's seated a few tables away, cleavage on display.

"That's not me," he says.

"Than maybe Marlene is not the one." James shrugs, emptying his beer.

"Or maybe you were cursed with a lust hex or something."

"A what?" Sirius and James ask at the same time.

Peter blushes. "I read one of my mum's books and the bloke in it was cursed with a lust hex, so they had to cure him before he married the girl."

James laughs so hard he chokes on his beer. It even improves Sirius' mood.

(-)

"That was exceptionally good."

Voldemort is, for once, breathing a little on the hard side. His robe is singed around his legs, from a hit Sirius can't even remember casting.

He looks down at Sirius, impressed. The approval in his eyes is enough to provide Sirius with the adrenaline to stand up, even though he's woozy, injured in too many places to count.

Their duels have gotten more difficult lately. Voldemort still holds back plenty, but not as much as in the beginning.

Sirius sways; he's about to topple down again. Voldemort is beside him in the blink of an eye, supporting Sirius's weight, one long arm around his shoulders.

"Not good enough," Sirius growls. He's been learning so much, straight from Voldemort. He's been reading more, raiding books from Rodolphus' and Lucius' private collections. And still he is nowhere near a match for this man.

Sirius hates losing, with a passion, especially so consistently.

Voldemort guides him inside the cabin and helps Sirius sit, before he takes off his robe.

Even in pain and discomfort, Sirius is still alert enough to be surprised by the difference a simple robe makes.

Under that black, flowing contraption, Voldemort is-

Slimmer than expected. There is a great expanse of shoulders, but it narrows down to a frail-looking waist.

And when Voldemort pulls back the sleeves of his shirt, his forearms are also remarkably slim, almost alarmingly so.

"Wizards are kept alive by magic", his father says. "But dark magic feeds on us. Be careful, Sirius. One must exercise caution."

Even as thin, when he crouches down besides Sirius, to heal his wounds, Voldemort looks no less imposing.

Sirius is staring down at him, for once, in this rare position, but the man is just as intimidating as always.

Not that Sirius truly fears him; not in a normal, sane way. Sirius doesn't fear death, nor torture- and he *is* getting tortured every Tuesday. First the Veritaserum practice, then, once he's already suffering from intense headaches, they move on to duels that get nastier and nastier with every week. But it's fine. Sirius isn't one to balk at pain.

"Pain makes you stronger," his father says.

In fact, Tuesdays are Sirius' favourite days of the weeks. They keep a routine, and yet it's always unpredictable, and it thrills him.

Voldemort isn't terrifying because of the pain or because one day he might just kill Sirius and think nothing of it afterwards. He's terrifying in an almost *neutral* sort of way, in a matter-of-fact way, as if he's simply made like that, without a purpose or goal in mind.

He's terrifying because he's *fascinating*, because Sirius can't stop thinking about him, can't stop wanting to know more.

He can't remember a person or a thing in his life that was able to hold Sirius' interest for so long.

What is he? Who is he? What does he want? What does he do in his free time? Does he exist in a void, only pulled out of it when he's the dark lord spreading terror in Britain? Questions that won't leave Sirius alone.

"You've been angrier than usual tonight," Voldemort comments, knitting Sirius' skin back together, prodding at the deep laceration on his right side. "It serves you well."

“Does it?” Sirius stares at him, afraid to even blink, lest he misses something important. An expression, a movement- *anything* that would reveal something about Voldemort. “You are never angry, and that seems to serve you even better.”

Voldemort doesn’t look up. “I assure you, my magic is even more potent when I’m in a rage. But you don’t wish to witness that.”

Right. Those rumours that come from Death Eater trials. Tales of Voldemort turning on his followers on a whim, in a fit of temper.

“Strong emotions are occasionally enough to give you an edge to win a battle.” He looks up. “Yet they don’t bring you much benefit in the long run. A war is more than one duel.”

Sometimes, when he’s drunk and unable to sleep, when he tries to figure out just what the hell is going on, Sirius rather thinks most people don’t even know what the war is about, on either side. Why they’re fighting.

The Ministry and Order are mostly just fighting *back*. But what is this war? Why did Voldemort start it?

He might have ridden on the wave of hate and desperation of the Sacred Twenty Eight, but that can’t be what the war is about, can it? Voldemort can’t want to help the purebloods and upheld their class-based system, not when he wouldn’t be welcomed by that very system, when he would never be allowed to climb on top of it.

“I’m not angry,” Sirius says, for whatever reason. Perhaps because he has no one else to speak to about it.

There’s Bella, but he’s been avoiding her since their little disagreement about Marlene. Besides, he knows what Bella would tell him to do.

No one else knows but her. And Sirius needs to talk about it, needs someone to tell him *not* to go.

“I’m supposed to have dinner with mum Sunday. She invited me- she ordered it.”

Voldemort tilts his head to one side, considering Sirius. “Anger, fear- it’s all the same to you.”

“I’m not *afraid*,” Sirius spits at him. “I’m just…”

But he can’t find a word for it.

Bella would tell him to go. She wants him back in Grimmauld. James would tell not to go, only Sirius doesn’t want to tell him he’s been there already- James wouldn’t understand why a part of Sirius craves his mother, not after many years of Sirius constantly saying he hates her and wants nothing to do with her. James believed him.

Sirius almost believes it himself. Almost. But not entirely.

Voldemort shifts until he sits beside Sirius. Too close, as usual, only Sirius doesn't quite remember when this has become the norm.

He recalls a time when he was the one trying to sit closer to Voldemort, to show he's not afraid, and yet now the tables have turned, Voldemort has called his bluff, and he's punishing Sirius by trespassing into his personal space every chance he gets.

He probably expects Sirius to say something, to draw away, but that's foolish of him. Instead, Sirius just became used to it.

"I don't want to see her. I don't like her," he says. She reminds him of so many awful fights, she reminds him why he left. Even worse, she reminds him of the great times in his childhood, of a time where everything was right in the world.

The house itself serves the same conundrum. It shoves terrible and amazing memories at Sirius, all at once.

"But if I don't go…" he looks down at his finger, his bare fingers, that should have the Black ring on it. "If I don't go, this will be it. She won't ever ask to see me again. Ignoring me for an hour and then ordering me to come see her might not seem like much, but coming from such a prideful creature…If I don't go, her and I are done. Forever. She wouldn't have ever asked. She disowned me so easily, and she'd *never* have reached out. It's only because Regulus tricked me to visit."

Sirius thought *she* made that step, so he went, and now she thinks *he* was the one to reach out, so she extended her type of olive branch. Only there are no olive branches in their family. More like thorny, poisonous branches, sure to cut and make him bleed, no matter how gently they're offered.

"It will be awful," he goes on. "Last time Lucius and Narcissa were there as buffers, and the time before that I was half-dead, but now there will be nothing to distract her."

He finds his pack squished in the back pocket of his trousers, and he fishes a fag out of it.

Voldemort, the *fucker,* grabs one too. He keeps stealing Sirius' cigarettes.

"Can't you buy your own?" he snaps at him.

Voldemort smiles. "Do you want me to pay you for a cigarette?"

"It's more like ten now," Sirius mumbles. "Do you even have pounds in your possession?" he asks, as Voldemort lights the fag.

"No. I have transcended the need for money. I can't remember the last time I had to pay for anything."

Sirius snorts. He imagines Lucius and Rodolphus and who knows how many others make sure their lord has anything he needs.

"That must be nice."

A raised eyebrow greets him from behind a curtain of smoke.

“You have a bottomless vault in Gringotts’ belly. It doesn’t get nicer than that.”

“I don’t,” Sirius argues. “I have surprisingly little left from the gold I inherited from my uncle .”

Sirius was shocked the last time he went to collect galleons from the bank; a sad and lonely stack of gold greeted him.

“I’ll probably need to find a job soon.”

That makes Voldemort laugh. His real laugh, deep and mesmerising. Sirius thinks there is something resembling a dimple in his left cheek when he does that. Or the shadow of a dimple that used to be there when his face wasn’t so affected by dark magic.

Sirius doesn’t appreciate being laughed at. “What? I can work; surely at the very least I can be a *shop boy*. Merlin knows one doesn’t need any qualifications for a job that *lowly*. Old Borgin will hire any idiot off the street.”

Voldemort laughter dims down into a smile, though no less amused. He leans even closer.

“You wouldn’t make it through a day at Borgin and Burke’s.”

Sirius snorts. “The cursed artefacts in Grimmauld make Borgin and Burke’s look like child play. I could navigate them in my sleep.”

“You don’t lack the skill or knowledge,” Voldemort says, causing an annoying jolt of pride to shoot through Sirius’ stomach. “But you’d have to deal with customers. With people like you- entitled, rich, arrogant purebloods that think the world revolves around them and everyone survives to serve them.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “I can deal with people like me. I can see why you’d find it hard- after all how could you ever understand what it means to be a pureblood,” he says, with as much snark as he can. “But I wouldn’t have an issue.”

“Really?” The amusement is still there. Sirius doesn’t know why Voldemort almost never takes the bait Sirius offers. It’s *insulting*. Sirius always has such an easy time pissing people off, he can do it within five seconds of meeting someone, and yet Voldemort refuses to let Sirius get to him. “Then why are you afraid to have dinner with your mother?”

Well, fuck you. Sirius takes a long drag out of his cigarette. “I’m not afraid, Merlin!”

Voldemort leans back into his chair, and Sirius breathes a little easier. He makes a gesture with his hand and the vial of Veritaserum and the one with the antidote float from a small cabinet and land in Sirius’ lap.

“I’m not doing this again,” Sirius warns.

“Do it at home. Take the serum, and ask yourself if you want to go. I always know what I want; ever since I was but a boy, I never hesitated.” He smiles. “It’s *getting* what I want that proved to be more complicated; it takes work, and time.” He stands, walks out of Sirius’ sight- behind him- and Sirius has to fight the impulse to turn his head around, to always keep his eyes on Voldemort.

It’s invariably unsettling not to know where the dark lord is, a primal instinct, Padfoot whispering in his head to keep his eyes on the other predator around.

Voldemort’s hand rests on Sirius’ shoulder, lightly. “Curious, how you have the opposite problem. You could have everything you desire without a second worth of struggle. It’s all there, at your feet, waiting to be taken. You only need to decide what you want and it will be yours.” He puts his other hand, on Sirius’ other shoulder, and he must bend slightly, because his voice comes much closer when he next speaks. “Stop wasting the immense privilege you were born into. Stop hiding from yourself. Take what you want. The only obstacle standing between you and what you most desire is yourself, Sirius.”

(-)

Kreacher serves them dinner in the quiet kitchen, softly mumbling to himself.

Sirius can’t remember a dinner as quiet in this household.

They exchanged greetings when he came in, and that was that. Regulus, bless his soul, tries to find a safe topic to discuss, but he’s met with a wall of silence.

As soon as Kreacher places a plate in front of him, Sirius grabs it, bends over the table and swaps it with Regulus’.

He forgot to forbid Kreacher from spitting in it.

“Aren’t you paranoid,” Regulus says, but as soon as he picks up his fork to dig in Sirius’ previous plate, Kreacher manifests and quickly takes it away.

“Paranoid, huh?” Sirius snorts, and they all watch Kreacher throwing the food away and serve Regulus a new portion.

“He’s getting crazier and crazier every year,” his mother says, not overly bothered.

“Perhaps you should show him some *mercy*,” Sirius suggests. “He is like seven hundred years old. It’s time for him to rest.”

“Kreacher is six hundred years,” the elf corrects from somewhere around the sink.

His mother sighs, turns to look at Kreacher pensively, before returning her attention to her dinner. “I can’t bring myself.”

“A pity,” Sirius says, while Regulus’ shoulders sag in relief.

Kreacher had been the de facto parent for generations of Blacks.

It’s only Sirius he didn’t raise.

Silence falls again as they eat. He resists temptation and he uses the proper forks, doesn’t put his elbows on the table.

I’m no longer a child, he keeps reminding himself any time he gets the urge to do something to provoke his mother into snapping at him.

Eventually, it’s she that she crumbles and provokes him. Sirius counts it as a victory, really. He *won*.

He’s not sure what he won, but as she starts talking and familiar anger ignites in him, he feels more comfortable, more normal than he felt in the tense, civil silence.

“Regulus got nine N.E.W.Ts,” she says, apropos of nothing. “How many did you get?”

“Mum,” Regulus looks at her pleadingly, but he has no chance of capturing her attention when Sirius is there, her cold eyes focused only on him.

“Eight,” Sirius says, keeping his voice level.

Her jaw works, her nose wrinkles. “Eight,” she says, as if it’s terrible to get eight N.E.W.Ts, as if Sirius hadn’t been in the top three oh his year. “If you’d have bothered to pick up a book, you’d have easily gotten eleven. Like your father. You wouldn’t have had to work half as hard as Regulus did.”

Ah, how nice. She managed to insult Sirius *and* Regulus at once. But Regulus shows no reaction, not for himself, at least. He only seems worried Sirius will say something, and now he turned his pleading eyes to him.

“Let it go,” he mouths, silently.

“Didn’t you get seven?” Sirius inquires, still holding his temper in check. Somewhat.

Regulus closes his eyes briefly.

“I did. But I’m just a *woman,*” she drawls, putting her fork down and grabbing an impressive goblet filled with wine. “What need could I possibly have for academic accomplishments? I don’t need an Oustanding in Charms to serve as a brood mare, after all.”

“Lovely,” Sirius hisses, because this is veering into father territory, into one of her old rants against him, and Sirius won’t sit there and let her badmouth the man.

“Though one needs quite the determination to go through twenty-seven hours of labor. Now *that* was lovely.”

“Mum,” Regulus begs.

She turns to him, pats him swiftly on the arm. “You were a good boy. You only took six hours.”

Of course, Regulus was so much *better*, even as an unborn baby. As if Sirius chose to take over a day to be born. As if he even asked to be conceived. But if he says that, she’ll say her father and his father forced her to marry and have children, and that will escalate into something even worse.

“It takes determination to throw said labour in my face for twenty years, too,” Sirius comments.

“Twenty?” She sneers. “I haven’t seen you in four years.”

Ah, here we go. Sirius wondered when that topic would show up.

He puts down his fork, and Regulus sighs, rubbing at his head.

“Well, mother, if you’d have run away at sixteen, then no one would have made you have children you clearly didn’t want. So don’t be bitter and jealous that I did what you lacked the nerve to do.”

“You’re both impossible,” Regulus snaps. “One dinner! Just *one* dinner, is that too much to ask for?”

“Mind your tone with me,” she snaps back, though she doesn’t turn to look at Regulus, still focused on Sirius. “You’re a bad influence,” she spits. “He never talks to me in that manner if he’s on his own. You always tried to turn him against me.”

“You tried to turn him against me,” Sirius accuses. “You tried to turn everyone against me!”

(-)

“Where is Regulus? Kreacher, find him!” his mother orders, leaning back in her chair.

Sirius supports himself against the wall, exhausted. He hasn’t even noticed Regulus was gone.

He was too busy screaming at his mother.

“I’m going home, anyway,” he says, voice hoarse.

“Don’t start me again!” she threatens, but she’s tired, too. “*Home*. This is your home.”

“Not according to the tapestry. *Someone* burned me off it!”

“You aren’t done yet?” Regulus asks from the doorway, Kreacher at his side.

“I’m done,” Sirius says, before she can answer. “I’m leaving. Thanks for dinner,” he adds sarcastically. “And for the wine, though it wasn’t served in a traditional fashion.”

She threw the content of her cup in his *face* at some point. His hair is still wet, red stains all over his shirt.

In retaliation, he went straight to the cupboard with her favourite porcelain tea set and broke them all.

That should keep Kreacher busy for some hours. He’s already bending over the damage, a mournful expression on his ugly little face as he picks up a shard.

“You can’t leave,” she says, standing to her full height. She’s a tall woman. Sirius remembers how intimidating she’d been when he was a young boy.

Now he can stare down at her with no issues.

“Not before you fix the wards and go through our papers. The office door won’t open for Regulus.”

“I can’t fix the wards,” Sirius shoots back. “I can give them blood, but it won’t help if I don’t live here. It won’t strengthen them.”

The house needs his blood *and* his presence to remain the stronghold his father made it.

“At least open the office for me,” Regulus intervenes, cutting over their mother. “Please. Our affairs are in disarray, I need to look over-”

“Fine!”

He marches up the stairs, relieved to leave the damned kitchen behind him.

Regulus trails after him, his footsteps covered by Kreacher complaining about the tea set, and their mother complaining about Sirius.

“You want to take a shower, first?” Regulus asks. “You’re dripping wine all over the place.”

“More work for your darling elf.”

He’s glad his mother already exhausted him, drained him of his anger and pain, because otherwise it would hurt much more to stand in front of his father’s office.

It still hurts, but he can handle it.

Gods, how he hates that office. It usually meant trouble. When his father asked to see Sirius there, it was rarely good news.

But Sirius knows that once he opens the door, he won't remember the times when he was berated inside those walls, lectured on one thing or another, asked to behave like the heir to their noble house.

No, when he opens it, he'll remember his father's strong presence, he'll see his ghost in a now dusty, empty chair.

He'll remember the times when he went in that office voluntarily, as a small child, woken up by nightmares and seeking his daddy out to feel safe, climbing in his lap and falling asleep at his chest as his father read something or wrote something or whatever it was that needed his attention.

"Why do you work so much?" Sirius asks, clinging to his wide shoulders. "You're never around! What's the point of being rich if you're gone all the time?"

"If I would stop working, then how could your mother burn a hole through our vault?" his father asks, amused.

"But we have plenty of gold!" Sirius protests. His father took him to Gringotts several times, and their fortune is so great a dragon has to guard it.

"A wise head of family adds to our fortune, instead of just spending it until nothing remains, generations from now."

Sirius doesn't want his father to be wise; he just wants him to stay home.

He places his hand on the doorknob, and he feels the magic woven through the house instantly accepting him. He twists, and the door cracks open.

"There," he whispers, looking away from it, facing Regulus. "You can go in."

Regulus sounds just as anxious. "I'm sure there's important stuff in the drawers that will only open for you-"

"I can't go in there," Sirius explains.

"You think it's easy for me?" Regulus hisses.

It should be. Regulus was never as close to their father. Regulus never sat in that office having to hear how he will become head of family one day, how he will take care of all Blacks, only for him to flee away from responsibility.

Regulus has nothing to feel ashamed and guilty about.

"Sirius, please. We - I have to take care of our affairs. We ignored them for too long, and the longer we delay, the worse everything will get."

He pushes the door open.

And there it is. Dark and dusty, but somehow Sirius can still smell the cigars his father enjoyed; the smell of expensive scotch fills his nose even if most likely he's just imagining it.

He steps inside and the candles on the walls flicker alive. It's so strange to be there without father.

They were never allowed inside on their own; they were promised severe consequences if they'd dared, and even fearless Sirius didn't push it.

At once, he feels like a kid that's doing something wrong and soon enough his parents will catch him.

Neither sit in father's chair, behind the imposing mahogany desk. They both sit in front of it, where they used to sit when their father wanted a word.

Above the dreaded chair, their coat of arms hangs from the wall, wrought in goblin made silver.

A chevron between two stars; at the base, a wand pointing upwards. On either side, a greyhound. And beneath the shield- *'Toujours Pur'*.

Sirius shivers.

Eventually, Regulus stands back up, manoeuvres around the office, nervously, careful not to touch their father's chair.

He was right. The drawers don't open for him. Sirius has to do it. So he does, and Regulus retrieves the parchments and journals, all in silence.

The portraits hanging all over the walls don't speak. Blacks rarely transfer their essence in portraits. They live on in their heirs, and in the stars.

"You won't want me hanging above your head, scolding you, when you're fifty," his father said, when Sirius asked why their dead relatives don't talk to them, like he'd seen other portraits do, in other Manors.

They end up surrounded by mountains of parchments.

Sirius just stares ahead as Regulus reads.

"Here, sign this," his little brother says, from time to time, handing Sirius their father's silver quill.

Regulus takes notes on an empty parchment- things he needs to do. Check their properties in France and Spain, something about a vineyard that needs tending to. Payments that need to be made, stuff like that.

"Who taught you all this?"

Sirius was taught by his father- not enough, they both imagined they will have more time. But he knows Regulus wasn't there to listen to the few lessons Sirius received.

"Cygnus, at first," Regulus says, making a muscle twitch in Sirius' jaw at the mention of that horrid man. "Grandfather refused for the longest time- I think he kept hoping you'd come back. But eventually he- well, eventually he taught me, too." A small smile. "He was peeved the office wouldn't even open for him."

Sirius snorts. He wishes his father wouldn't have been this stubborn; he wishes he'd have passed all these responsibilities to his own father, who knew how to handle them.

But 'Blacks look to the future, not the past'. Which is ridiculous and a blatant *lie*, since they are living in the past, entrenched in centuries-old traditions, shackled by their own ancestors and the rules they laid out for everyone that was to come after them.

When he can't stand to be alone in his head anymore, Sirius takes some of the parchments himself, trying to make sense of the legal terms he once knew- he *still* knows- floating around somewhere at the back of his head.

(-)

"He's not sleeping well," his mother's voice startles Sirius, many hours after they entered the office.

He looks up to see her leaning on the doorframe. She's watching Regulus, who fell asleep at some point, in a position he'll surely regret when he wakes up, neck craned, the side of his face pressed against the wax seal stamp.

She comes in, slowly, eyes moving briefly over their fathers chair, as if she, too, expects to see him there.

"Eat your dessert before you leave," she says, looking down at him.

Sirius snorts.

"I think Kreacher made you cauldron cakes, since he remembers you like them so much."

Kreacher wouldn't think to give Sirius a glass of water if he was dying of thirst.

Someone else must have ordered him to make cauldron cakes.

"I like different desserts these days," he says, just because he's an arse, just because he doesn't know how to handle his mother doing something nice for him, especially after she threw a glass of wine in his face and called him a disgrace.

It's her turn to snort. "Well, then..." She moves to the liquor cabinet.

She takes out his father's scotch and two crystal glasses. Sirius watches her fill them, before she sends one to him with a flick of her wand, and taking hers along, to sit on the settee in a corner of the room.

"He'd hate us drinking in here," Sirius says. His father would have a fit at Regulus falling asleep over important papers.

"He's dead," she says. "There's nothing he can do about it."

The only reason Sirius's temper doesn't flare at her words is because she doesn't sound malicious or gleeful. She probably aimed for a matter-of-fact tone, but it came out almost sad.

They drink in silence for a while, under the cold eyes of long dead Black patriarchs, silently judging them.

"Do you remember that filthy little muggle that used to live across the street? You were six years old, or just about."

"Brigitte," Sirius says, taking a sip. He can still see her blonde pigtails and her big smile, with the front tooth missing.

"You were fascinated with her toys, because they had those bamerys."

"Batteries."

She huffs. "You'd sneak out and go to the park with her. I tried to stop you, but it was like trying to trap smoke. No one could contain you. And one day you gave her a flower."

She'd shared her delicious, foreign muggle sweets with him, so Sirius stole an orchid from a street vendor and offered it to her.

"Your father found out."

"*Found out,*" Sirius snorts. "As if he'd have found out on his own, when he wasn't ever home. Kreacher told him."

"The lecture I got." She shakes her head.

"*You* got?" Sirius raises an eyebrow at her. He only remembers what he got.

"He wasn't happy I knew about it and didn't tell him. He wasn't happy I didn't stop you. As if I could stop you, when he taught you the only person you have to obey was himself."

"Mum," Sirius begs, so tired of this old fight.

Her jaws tense, but blessedly she moves on. "He sent you to bed without dinner. He was enraged with me if I swatted you, said only animals hit children, but apparently starving them was very civilised."

Sirius had no fear of his mother, and the occasional slap he'd receive, over the head, over his face or over his arse when he pissed her off enough. He much preferred them over not being allowed to eat dinner for a day or two. Or if his father was feeling particularly vindictive, he wouldn't let Sirius eat dessert for *weeks*. Sirius was never starved, not like his mother made it sound. But it was just the torture of it, having to sit at the dinner table, watching his brother get cakes or sugar quills or cookies, while Sirius received an apple; he'd have to eat bland porridge while Regulus had crepes for breakfast. And there was no hope of trying to steal something sweet from the kitchen, not with Kreacher ready to tell on Sirius, as soon as his father came back from work.

"The next morning you came down for breakfast and I just knew, from the second I saw your furious, determined little face, that trouble was coming. You sat down and you didn't eat a thing."

Sirius smiles. "I decided I'd go on a hunger strike."

"I kept pestering you to eat, but you just sat there, staring at your plate. Then your father stood, and he cursed your chair, said you wouldn't be able to leave it until you ate. He charmed your food from spoiling and just left."

That was the longest day of Sirius' life. He'd had far worse days since then, he'd had painful days, *unbearable* ones, but that- that was the longest, as he was glued to that chair, hungry, stomach growling, with the food right in front of him.

"I begged you, I yelled at you, I tried to bribe you into eating, but you wouldn't. Impossible child." He can hear the frustration in her voice. "I even shoved food in your mouth, but you spat it on me. Such a difficult boy you were."

"I was trying to make a point," he argues, but without raising his voice. He doesn't want to wake Regulus, especially since their mother said he isn't sleeping well lately.

"We managed to get some water in you-"

"You almost *drowned* me, you mean."

Kreacher held his jaws open, and she spilled water in his mouth.

"But nothing else. I was very close to using the Imperius on you, you know? But it was late afternoon already, and I told myself your father would come home and make you eat." She snorts. "He came home, I told him, I begged him to do something, but he didn't. He just came down to the kitchen, looked at you, and asked Kreacher to serve us dinner in the dining room."

Sirius, too, had thought his father would come home, and when he'd learn Sirius had nothing to eat, when he'd see his resolve, he'd apologise and promise to never take food away as punishment.

He'd still been a naive child back then. When he saw his father entering the kitchen and the departing it without a word to Sirius, it crushed him.

“I yelled at him that it’s barbaric to have dinner, while you were starving alone in the kitchen, and he said that you have food- you only need to eat it. I wanted to shove my fork in his stupid eyes for the entire thing. He wouldn’t relent. He was convinced you’d cave through the night. I told him you were no regular six year old, that you were a little demon that would do anything out of spite, but he wouldn’t bulge.”

“Thanks, mum,” he hisses, taking a generous gulp from his glass.

“Stop that. You were a right terror and you well know it,” she hisses back. Somehow, she still refuses to take any accountability for how badly behaved Sirius was. Yes, he had been difficult, but surely parents have some measure of impact over a child’s development, don’t they?

Then how do you explain Regulus? He has the same parents, and yet he came out fine.

“I spent the entire night with you; I wanted to strangle you. You were so frustrating, and so pitiful at the same time. I warned you there’s no winning with your father, that eventually you will cave, and then all the torment you were inflicting on yourself and on me would be for nothing. I asked you to understand, but you wouldn’t.”

“You were wrong,” Sirius says, softly.

She searches his face, her eyes just like his own. “I was. When Orion came downstairs and he still found you there…I’ve known him since he was *born*. I’ve seen him imposing his will on powerful men in our circles. And yet here he was, defeated by his six-year-old son. He told you to get out of his sight, he released the curse and the triumph that shined on your face…” She smiles, if only barely. “You got up, stumbling, supporting yourself on a wall. You took a flower out of the vase, walked up the stairs, straight out the front door. Orion and I followed you and we saw you cross the street, knock on that little animal’s door, and gave her the rose when she opened it.”

Sirius only vaguely remembers that part. He knows he’s done it, but he can’t remember it. He’d probably been exhausted.

“You came back home and collapsed in the hallway.” She finishes her drink and stands. “Your grandfather was visiting us that day. When he heard what happened, he called your father weak. He said Orion was being too lax with you, that you needed a proper beating, otherwise you’ll climb all over us.” She walks to the door, giving the dreaded chair one more look, before turning her eyes to Sirius again. “Orion disagreed. He told Arcturus he doesn’t intend to beat your fire out of you. He said he’s raising a leader, not a follower. He sounded proud. That was the last time he used food as punishment.”

The tears come on suddenly, and with no hope of containment. Or maybe he would be able to stop them, if he was someplace else. With *outsiders*. But he is in Black presence.

With his own.

He feels his dark mark, though it’s not Voldemort calling. Sirius is just very aware of it, filled with shame. He’s not the leader his father wanted him to be.

He's a lap dog to two half-bloods.

Parkinson' last words ring in his head. *Your father would roll over in his grave.*

"Take your cauldron cakes with you when you leave. I made them with fudge and cherries."

And then she's gone.

(-)

He is never clear whether or not it's legal to have sexual relationships with someone of the same gender. Muggles are weird, and Sirius didn't consider it too much, because it isn't a concern to him, after all.

But he knows these types of bars are illegal, or at least they are regularly raided by police officers.

Bars where men come to pick up other men.

Funnily enough, it was Remus that somehow stumbled into one, and then he'd brought the Marauders along to show them. Sirius likes these places, and he came alone, a handful of times, without his mates.

There's something about these bars, a sense of camaraderie, of secrecy, that appeals to him.

Muggle girls are always nosy, wanting to know his telephone number, or his full name, or what he does for a living.

In these type of places, they don't ask such questions. And while Sirius easily pulls birds, here it is *effortless*. These men know what they want, and they don't play coy.

Sirius is like a magnet from the second he steps inside. He's also very drunk, close to black out, otherwise he'd hear his mother yelling about *disgrace* in his head.

Within minutes, he's offered more drinks. And he only needs to ask for 'drugs' as he learned the muggles call them, and he's given some. He's not sure what, it isn't the kind he needs to snort, just swallow, but he takes it anyway.

There are some women in the crowd, but so few they don't count. Male bodies all around, dancing, grinding against each other-

It almost makes it feel like it's normal for Sirius to want it as well, it erases his mother's screams from that night, with the Rosier cousin; the hard eyes of his father, when his mother dragged Sirius home from the party, shoved him in the office and proceeded to describe the entire thing to his father.

Sirius wants the floor to open up and swallow him.

"Even you can't ignore that about your precious heir," she says, still gripping Sirius' robe. "How is he supposed to give us an heir if-"

"There are potions for it, in case he won't find his future wife… stimulating," his father says, and Sirius can't look up, just stares at his boots, incredibly uncomfortable.

"Did you hear what I just said?" she shrieks. "I found them with their hands in each other trousers! Drunk, and behaving like that, shaming our family name-"

"Enough. Get out."

Sirius picks up the danger in his voice, and so does his mother. And even if she just dragged him there to tell on him, to get him punished, he hates hearing his father talking to her like that. He hates knowing that even if she screams and complains and generally does what she likes, deep down she's afraid of his father.

She lets go of Sirius and opens the door, slamming it behind her. Sirius moves to follow her-

"Stay," his father orders, and Sirius closes his eyes.

"You alright?" someone asks, and Sirius opens his eyes, back into the dimly lit room, music booming in his head, in his chest.

"Grand," he answers, throwing back another shot.

And another. And another.

He catches the eye of a tall man on the other side of the room. He's covered in shadows, but he's starting at Sirius.

Sirius pushes a couple of men that were talking at him out of the way, and he heads straight to the one that captured his interest.

Well, maybe not straight- he stumbles a little, but he reaches his target without too many difficulties, manoeuvring between the men dancing around him.

The man smiles when Sirius reaches him, leaning on a wall, He has a nice smile- no, not *nice*. He has a dangerous smile, too many teeth to be anything short of perilous.

Sirius has some disjointed memories about the last two times he came to these bars. He thinks he tried talking first, that he'd been hesitant, uncertain.

But for some reason, Voldemort's voice rings inside his head, covering his mum's.

"Take what you want. The only obstacle standing between you and what you most desire is yourself." Sirius believes it's the best, most freeing advice anyone has ever given him in his life.

So he strides forward, crowds the man into the wall, thrilling in the knowledge he doesn't have to be a gentleman, he doesn't need to make sure he won't frighten some girl he likes with his stature or forwardness.

Of course, Sirius could as easily hurt this man as he could hurt a woman, but at least the bloke doesn't know that. He isn't scared, his smile just gets wider.

He has dark eyes- impossible to tell their colour, not in that bad lighting, not with how drunk Sirius is. But they're dark, and intense, and *hungry*.

His hair is long enough for Sirius to sink his fingers into it.

Sirius kisses him.

He wonders if it would feel this good if he were to kiss men more often, or if the novelty of it would wear off, eventually.

The music turns to something faster, a deep bass reverberating all around, and Sirius just gets more aggressive.

And so does the man, a hand on Sirius' nape, the other on Sirius' back, pulling him closer.

It's such a rush, maddening and all-consuming. He has no idea how long they stand there, groping each other, teeth sinking in lips, tongues exploring. He only knows he's desperately hard, and he somehow grows *harder* when he feels another stiff prick pressing into his thigh.

He rips himself away with great difficulty, reassured it is a momentary loss. He grabs a handful of material and pulls the man by his shirt, after him.

They stumble into a bathroom. By the sounds coming from closed stalls, they aren't the only ones there to misuse the room. Soon, they're in their own stall, barely large enough to fit two large men.

Sirius ends up pressed against the wall, but it's fine. It's what he wants.

It's how it went last time.

He pushes his hands under the shirt, feeling hot skin, firm muscle under his fingers.

Maybe, one day, Sirius will have a man in a bed, naked and all. Maybe one day he'll be able to explore all he wants.

For now, he turns his fingers to undo the buttons on tight, tight jeans, as his own belt is being opened.

The noise he makes when a large hand closes around his cock is swallowed by the music outside, by the noises of pleasure from the next stall.

"Fuck, yeah!" Sirius can hear the grin in the man's voice, even if his mouth is somewhere along Sirius' neck. "What a *handful*."

Sirius likes his voice. He also likes his cock, when he finds it- the hardness of it, the silky skin.

This would be so much better if they go someplace else. If Sirius could rip the clothes off him, look as much as he wants, touch as his leisure-

“Condom?”

Condom. Sirius tries to think through the haze of lust and alcohol and who knows what other substances are in his system.

Muggle speak is always the most difficult to decipher when he’s drunk.

Protection, it comes to him. Muggles have these strange sheaths they wear over their pricks when they have sex. Some girls were insistent about it until he caved and put one on. To protect against pregnancy, they said, as if Sirius wasn’t a fucking wizard, as if he didn’t always cast the necessary spells needed to stop a tragedy like that.

But you can’t get pregnant, he almost says. He can’t imagine why a condom would be used between two men. But he knows he must be missing something about the entire thing, something any muggle would know, so he stays quiet.

Quiet, but busy, working his hand over the man’s cock, gathering the beads of pre-cum that collected at the head, slicking him up.

The muggle seems to forget about the condom shortly after. He draws his head back, leaving Sirius’ neck wet and no doubt bruised.

“It’s like you stepped out of a movie- no, not even a movie,” he amends, staring at Sirius, running his eager hand through Sirius’ long hair, now free of constraint, spilling over his shoulders. “Like a dream. You’re stunning!”

“Suck me off,” Sirius growls. It’s so animalistic it’s a wonder he didn’t bark at the man.

“Gladly.”

Sirius loves muggles, he thinks, as he watches the stranger kneel. He resists the impulse to close his eyes and get lost in the pleasure when a hot mouth wraps around his cockhead.

Because the pleasure is more intense if he watches, if he sees a man with sharp, masculine features licking and sucking his prick, while stroking his own.

It’s fucking brilliant.

(-)

It's not even cheating, is it? Marlene was very clear she'd feel hurt if he fucks another woman. She said nothing about men, did she?

And it's not even fucking, really. Getting his cock sucked and then wanking the other bloke doesn't count as fucking, he decides, healing the shallow bites on his neck. Besides, it's quite probable he'll forget all about it by the time he sobers up.

Not *forget*, necessarily, he still remembers the first two times he'd done this, but just … shoved away somewhere in his mind, blurry and dream like.

Peter shakes his head when Sirius shows up on his doorstep in the middle of the night, but he doesn't say anything, just sighs and brings a pillow that he throws on the couch, before retreating to his room.

He can't go home. Marlene knows he's away with Voldemort, and she'd guess something is off is he comes back drunk and high and smelling of sex.

It's not like he can tell her he got drunk with Voldemort, and it would be even harder to explain why he smells of sex.

Sex and Voldemort, his drunk mind connects the words, in a way they shouldn't be connected. Sirius tries to laugh into his pillow, but he isn't laughing. His cock twitches in his trousers. The room spins around him, he is barely able to make sense of what's going on in his head, fractured, incongruous thoughts swimming around, until he blessedly blacks out.

(-)

"What's going on, Sirius?" James asks with a thoughtful expression that rarely graces his features.

"What do you mean?"

"You were just calming down a bit for a while there, but now you're…" James searches around for a word, frowning. "Restless. Is it…*you know*?"

Sirius busies himself with some muggle magazines Lily has on their living room coffee table, flicking through them without reading a word.

"No. It's not Voldemort."

Strangely, Voldemort is relatively a calming influence in Sirius' life. Sure, there's the obsessive thoughts Sirius has about him, the curiosity, but there's something very…steadfast about Voldemort. Even the intense Tuesday night meetings, no matter how painful or challenging they get, there's a purpose to it. Sirius has the feeling of achieving something, improving his dueling skills, learning how to resist Veritaserum. It feels like he's doing something beneficial for himself.

“It is Marlene, then? You’re at each other’s throats lately.”

James is so focused on Sirius, the practice snitch flies right past his head and James doesn’t get it.

“I guess.”

It’s less Marlene that’s suffocating him, and more his own guilt at not treating her the way she deserves to be treated. He knows she’s not the one being impossible, that it’s warranted for her to want the things she does.

And a part of Sirius wants that, too. Settle down, go partying with her- they always used to have such fun when they got out together. Yet he can’t be sure he only had fun because he was pursuing her, and it was like a hunt, a game of snatching her away from Gideon, or, respectively, her own hunt, trying to get rid of other girls surrounding Sirius.

Now there’s no need for that; now, wherever they go, there’s no thrill to it. They know they’ll return home together. And that could be fine, he thinks. Deep down, Sirius wouldn’t mind it so much.

But there’s that voice inside his head that keeps whispering he’d lose part of himself, he’d lose the independence he fought so hard to get. Whenever Marlene wants them to eat together, it feels like the burden his family meals had been, with rigid schedules.

Whenever she asks where she’s going or when he’s coming back, something inside him bristles.

Having gone home didn’t help matters. It just confused him further. Sirius has many reasons why he doesn’t want to return to Grimmauld, and one of the most important is that he’d have to give up himself, and what he wants. Another reason- the constant fights he’d have with his mother. His home always felt like a war zone.

But now he has that problem in his own house- he has fights with Marlene and he feels his independence slipping away from him.

An errant thought keeps insisting that if he’s willing to give all that up, then the Blacks, the memory of his father, his family is more important than Marlene; that if he’s caving anyway, growing up, he could just as well do it with his own damn family.

“You could have everything you desire without a second worth of struggle. It’s all there, at your feet, waiting to be taken. You only need to decide what you want and it will be yours.”

It’s like Voldemort reached inside the darkest part of Sirius’ brain, the Blackest, and gave power to a voice that always demanded Sirius do what he wants.

(-)

He wakes up in a peculiar place, a dull ache at the back of his head. *What the fuck, I wasn't even drunk.*

Was I? No, he wasn't. He went to a concert- *ah, right.*

He got into a fight with some muggles, and he was doing just fine until one hit him over the head with something.

"Alright there?" his cellmate asks.

Great. A muggle police section. Just *great.*

"What's the time?" he asks, but before the muggle answers, Sirius sits up, rubbing the back of his head, and he sees the clock on the wall outside the cell announcing it's three in the morning.

Even better. Marlene will *love* this, him not showing up. She'd either think he's out cheating on her, or that Voldemort offed him.

For the next three hours, as two of the other men there sleep, and another keeps muttering how he 'didn't do it', Sirius struggles to think what he should do. His wand isn't with him, which is concerning. There are two many people around to attempt wandless magic, there are those camera thingies watching him, and he has no one to call.

Lily doesn't have a telephone anymore, and he knows of no other muggleborn- well, Mary would help, but he doesn't know if Mary has a telephone or what the number would be.

At six in the morning, a fight starts when the muttering man wakes up one of the sleeping ones.

They punch and wrestle each other all around the cell, and eventually a guard comes to yell at them to break it off.

"Sorry, sir," Sirius asks. "When can I get out?"

He speaks of court, judges, and other nonsense, but Sirius understands he can't get out. Not soon.

Something about due process.

"And you're not making things easier on yourself by not telling us your name."

Right. That's an issue. Sirius has no muggle documents. He told them his name when they arrested him, woozy as he was, but he assumes they can't find him in their ….data stuff or whatever they call it.

At seven in the morning, out of options and bored out of his mind watching the other three idiots snapping at each other, Sirius thinks 'what can go wrong' and presses his fingers to his dark mark.

He was told that would summon Voldemort.

He laughs, startling his cellmates, because- he can just imagine Voldemort strolling into the station, with his red eyes and his robe.

Will he come? Can I truly just summon the great dark lord like a dog?

"Do not use it without cause," Voldemort warned, when he taught Sirius how to do it. *"Only if it is truly necessary."*

"Why are you laughing?" One man looks at Sirius as if he's gone mad. He seems frightened. He turns to the others when Sirius doesn't answer. "Why is he *laughing*?"

They wouldn't get it. Sirius laughs harder. He truly does not expect Voldemort to come, so when he does, Sirius blinks at him, repeatedly, watching him approach the cell.

He looks-

Well.

He's wearing a glamour, so his red eyes are brown, his face less- sinister. He's wearing a suit. A muggle suit.

"Why are you surprised?" Voldemort asks, when he's in front of the cell, and Sirius just stands like a moron, staring at him. "You did call me."

"I didn't think you'd show up," he confesses.

The police officer trails after Voldemort, silently, eyes vacant. The Imperius, without doubt.

"Why wouldn't I?" Voldemort's eyebrow raises almost into his hairline, and *fuck*, he has beautiful eyes, when they're not blood shot.

They're just as intense as always, despite the glamour.

"I told you I would, and you promised you wouldn't use it for something *silly.*"

A loaded pause follows, but Voldemort's lips pull up, just slightly.

"I didn't know what else to do," Sirius mumbles. With more confidence, he adds: "Aren't you going to let me out?"

Voldemort seems very at ease, nothing urgent about him.

"Of course posh boy has a rich arsehole to get him out of trouble," one of the men behind him complains, filled with jealousy.

"Shut it," Sirius snarls, looking over his shoulder.

"Open the cell," Voldemort says, and the officer obliges, fumbling with the keys.

He's surely going to lose his job, Sirius thinks, looking up into the camera on the hallway, that somehow records whatever happens in the station so it can be reviewed later.

Moody told him that, told him to be careful not to perform obvious magic in these sort of places.

This isn't *obvious* magic. This just looks like the officer is letting Sirius go.

"Sorry," Sirius whispers to him, when the cell is open and he walks past the poor bastard. Obviously, he is not acknowledged, empty eyes glazed and fixed into the distance. "They took my-" hmm "*stuff,*" he tells Voldemort.

"I already recovered it." Voldemort doesn't tell the officer to do anything else, just turns around and walks away, Sirius quickly walking after him.

The other officers sit quietly at their desks when they reach the main room.

Once they are out of the building, Voldemort pulls Sirius' wand out his jacket pocket and hands it over.

"How on earth did they take it away from you?"

Sirius sighs, relieved when his fingers close around the familiar wood. "I was at a concert and I got into a fight with some cunts."

He can't look away from Voldemort's brown eyes. The glamour he uses- his *old* eyes. Sirius would recognise them everywhere, after spending hours staring at Tom Riddle's picture.

"And I was doing just fine-"

"I can see." Voldemort glances at Sirius' hands. His knuckles are bruised and covered in dried blood.

"But then someone hit me over the head with something- a bat, or I don't know. Threw me off a little."

It threw the muggle healer off too, when he was checking Sirius over, who was already handcuffed by that point, and they found the blood drying in his hair and on the back of his t-shirt, but they couldn't find a wound. Sirius' magic already healed it.

In fact, Sirius is rather certain he'd be dead without his magic, that any muggle would have succumbed to such a hit.

Sure, Sirius was a *little* out of it for some time, but he was alive.

"And I took out my wand, but before I could use it, police showed up and tackled me and those other bastards, too. They took the bat thing and my wand as 'evidence' or something."

Voldemort gives him a *look*- half unbelieving, half exasperated.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Sirius waves it away and starts walking again. “I should grow up.”

Behind him, he can hear the other men that had been locked up with him quickly slipping away from the station.

He wonders when will the officers snap out of the curse.

“I don’t think you’ll grow out of your violent behaviour,” Voldemort comments, walking at his side.

Sirius shrugs. “They had it coming. They insulted Freddie.”

There are rumours that the singer enjoys male company, and the stupid muggles were making hateful remarks about it very close to Sirius.

He couldn’t help himself.

“Freddie again,” Voldemort says, but when Sirius looks his way, he sees a satisfied smirk. “Freddie Mercury.”

“Ten points to Slytherin.” Sirius rolls his eyes, but his stomach tightens knowing that Voldemort bothered to find out who Freddie was.

“What are you doing?” Voldemort asks, when Sirius knocks on the door of a coffee shop, before quickly cleaning the blood on his clothes and hands with a wave of his hand.

“I want coffee.”

“It’s closed.”

Sirius grins just as the door opens to reveal a woman. “We open in half an hour-”

Sirius moves closer, leans on the half-opened door. “I’ve had a terrible, terrible night and I’m afraid it set the tone for the day, too. I desperately need a cup of coffee.” He gives her his most winning smile, and what Remus used to call his puppy eyes, and that’s it.

She smiles, and he knows he has her.

“Please,” he says. “Save me! Be my hero.”

She rolls her eyes, but she blushes. “Oh, alright!”

“Coming?” Sirius asks over his shoulder, making his way inside. There are still chairs on half of the tables, and the floor is slippery, recently washed. He sits at a corner table, and Voldemort soon joins him.

“No one can say no to this face,” Sirius cheekily informs him.

“How do you want it?” the woman asks from behind the counter.

“Black.”

“And your friend?”

Sirius grins wider as he watches *his friend.*

“I’m fine,” Voldemort answers, evenly.

“It’s on me,” Sirius says with a wink.

“You have no money,” Voldemort points out, and he pulls out the wallet Sirius uses when he’s out into the muggle world.

“There’s my money.”

“Yet I am holding them.”

“So I should add thief to the ever-growing list of your qualities.” Sirius shrugs. “You can keep it. I’m positive I can persuade her not to charge me anything.”

“On account of the impossible to resist face,” Voldemort comments, amused.

“That’s right,” Sirius answers, just as the woman brings over his coffee. There’s a muffin there, too.

“It’s from yesterday,” she warns. “Still good, just not as fresh.”

Sirius bites into it, making sure to lick his lips. “Delicious,” he tells her. “Thank you, love.”

Under the cup, there’s a napkin. She scrawled her telephone number on it.

Sirius doesn’t doubt Voldemort used Tom Riddle’s face, long before, to get all sorts of favours, too. He doesn’t look as in awe as Peter is when Sirius uses his charm to get what he wants, nor as exasperated as Remus.

“How ungrateful,” he drawls, when Sirius vanishes the napkin with the number.

If it weren’t for Marlene, Sirius would keep the number. He’d find a pay phone in the weekend, on a slow night, and he’d use it.

As it is, he can’t do that.

“It takes more than a cup of coffee and a stale muffin to benefit from my *company*,” he drawls back.

And while Voldemort’s accent is cultured, it has *nothing* on Sirius’, when he decides to make full use of it. If he wants, he can sound just as obnoxious as Lucius.

“And yet I am subjected to your company for free.”

I obviously meant in bed, Sirius thinks but he doesn’t say it. “Well, you are the dark lord.”

Gods, what a pity, he thinks, distracted, when Voldemort smiles, and his eyes smile too, crinkling at the corners. Why would anyone ruin eyes like those?

“And you got me out of jail, so not really free, is it?”

“Am I your hero, too?” Before Sirius can answer, he pulls out Sirius’ cigarettes from his apparently very accommodating pocket. Those were probably confiscated by the police, along his wand and wallet.

“I am a dreadful influence on you,” Sirius mutters, watching him light a fag.

Voldemort actually laughs now, a deeply pleasant sound.

“What were you doing when I called you?” Sirius is no longer able to control his curiosity.

Was Voldemort sleeping? Was he taking a morning shower? Having a cup of tea? Brushing his teeth with the brooding toothbrush? Or existing in that void just waiting to be the dark lord again?

“You took your sweet time. Were you sleeping?” Sirius presses when Voldemort doesn’t answer right away.

“Sleeping?” Voldemort now steals his *coffee*, and this has to stop, really, the man has no boundaries. Sirius didn’t imagine taking the mark would be like marriage, where what now belongs to him belongs to Voldemort as well. “No rest for the wicked, Sirius.”

“Don’t I know it?” Sirius mutters, grabbing his coffee back. In the process, his fingers brush past Voldemort’s. As always, he notes just how cool his skin is. Unnaturally so.

Splitting one’s soul would do that to a person. It would also disfigure someone, though Sirius hesitates to call Voldemort disfigured. But there’s certainly something *off* about his face, something that erased Tom Riddle’s perfect features.

It would also stop someone from casting a Patronus.

Sirius takes great care not to glance at the hideous ring, even if he slightly touches it when he retrieves his cup.

He could be wrong, of course. He *wants* to be wrong. But Voldemort claims he’s immortal, and there are preciously few ways in which that can be attained. There’s also the way he seemed so concerned about Dumbledore thinking about the ring- it was what bothered him most about Sirius finding Morfin’s memories.

Did he truly rip his soul apart at -what, seventeen? Did he use the murder of his own father for it? Was he even fully aware of what he was doing?

Secrets of the Darkest Arts is named so, because it truly deals with the most dangerous, *darkest* aspects of magic.

"A cautionary tale," his father had said, when he gave Sirius the book. *"What you will find within these pages is so extreme that only the most desperate and unwise of wizards would resort to. It's a path to destruction, not power. Read it once, and stay away from it."*

Regulus was there, too, happy to be included in something, elated to have their father care enough to impart a lesson on his second son.

The woman must have noticed the brief hustle for the cup of coffee, so she brings another one, fills them both.

"There's a big party tomorrow night," she says. "If you want to come, give me a call."

"Expect one, " Sirius lies, with his brightest smile. She smiles back and returns to her duties, arranging the tables, getting them ready for opening.

"How was the visit with your mother?"

Sirius narrows his eyes. "How do you know I went?"

Voldemort holds his gaze.

Once more, Sirius gets very distracted by his eyes. It's such a warm brown. Very dark, yet a *warm* colour. What deity would give them to a monster that won't even appreciate them?

"It was fine. We all survived, and my stupid elf only spit in my meal once."

"Quite the unruly slave," Voldemort says, once again taking Sirius' cup, even if he now has his own, untouched.

He's just doing it to mess with me.

"Slave?" Sirius makes a face. "Why, you sound like a muggleborn with those notions. Lily made James free his old family elf, when he inherited it after his parents died, because she won't become a 'slave owner'. The poor thing killed itself."

"Being brainwashed into thinking their sole purpose is to serve doesn't mean they aren't slaves."

"Why don't you become a house-elf rights activist? That would spare us all from a war."

"I won't speak for any creature that is too cowardly and stupid to fight for themselves."

You won't speak for anyone. You want to enslave us all, you make people kneel for you, you hypocritical-

Sirius breathes, snatches his coffee *back*, once more and drinks it all. *There.* Now Voldemort doesn't have what to steal.

"I do find myself in need of an elf," Voldemort mentions. "I wish to test a spell. I assume you are still the rightful master of your own."

“I am.” Sirius frowns. “What, you want to borrow Kreacher?”

“Just an idea. You don’t have to agree to it.”

“Kreacher is bound to obey me, but he also obeys my mum. If she asks him about what you-”

“He wouldn’t be returning.”

Sirius’ eyebrows shoot up.

“Gods, *yes!* Whenever you need him, just say it.”

Finally, he can get rid of that demented arsehole. He could have done it at any point after his father’s death, but Regulus would have never forgiven him.

But now, if Regulus bitches about it, Sirius will say the much adored dark lord needed a faithful elf.

(-)

Remus says hello when he comes into the pub, but he doesn’t sit at their table. Instead, he moves to stand with Fabian and the Longbottoms.

James’ jaw ticks in annoyance, and Peter shifts uncomfortably, looking from Sirius to Remus, and back again.

Luckily they can’t talk about it, since Marlene and Lily are busy snarking at each-other.

Sirius suspects they are both beginning to enjoy this show they got going, and if they carry on, soon they’ll be friends or something close to it.

Just as James makes an effort to relax and Peter stops staring at Remus, Sirius feels his mark burning.

He freezes. He was in the middle of a funny, if slightly embellished anecdote involving a muggle bike chase, and his first thought is, absurdly- *‘I can’t leave before I finish it’*.

After the initial lunacy, he doesn’t know how to explain his departure.

Marlene, James and Lily would understand. But Peter...

But there’s no avoiding it, is it?

“Come with me,” he tells Marlene, standing and grabbing her elbow, forcing her to stand as well. “Excuse us for a minute,” he tells the rest.

He takes her to the bathroom. “I have to go,” he whispers as soon as they enter. He jerks his head in the direction of his left hand.

“Shit.” She says something else, only *another* voice speaks inside his head at the same time.

Wear the mask.

“What?” Sirius asks, shocked.

“What?” Marlene looks up at him, worried.

Sirius shakes his head.

“I have to go. Just- stay here for a bit on your own and yell out what a berk I am or whatever, and then go back and tell the rest we fought and I left.”

“Alright,” she says. “I-be careful.”

He gives her a quick kiss and Apparates to his house.

He runs up the stairs, retrieves his mask from the nightstand and his robe from the back of his closet. He puts them on as he runs back out of the house and Apparatates again.

(-)

The room is filled with Death Eaters. One of the ballrooms in Lestrange Manor that had apparently been repurposed for a half-blood and a bunch of grown men in *costumes.*

There’s a long table in the middle, and the spot at Voldemort’s left is empty. Lucius’ spot.

Bella isn’t there either. Sirius just *knows*. No matter the charms on the masks and robes, he just knows she’s not there. The connection they share, deeper than any magic, deeper than love or hate, never fails him when she’s concerned.

Is Lucius late?

There are other empty spots along the table, but, as usual, Sirius won’t be satisfied with getting one of the *bad* seats.

Voldemort jerks his head toward Lucius’ chair, almost unnoticeable.

Only it’s impossible for Voldemort not to be noticed in that crowd, where he’s the sole focus of the room.

Sirius steals that attention, because he’s always been a show stealer, hasn’t he?

He feels eyes on him, and he doesn’t know why until he’s already seated.

The fuck do they want? Did he put the mask wrong? Did he pick the wrong robe, and maybe this one has unicorns and glitter on it?

That happened to him once, going to meet Voldemort with glitter in his hair, barbie stickers on his robe and his nails painted pink. He'd spent the day playing with Andy and little Dora and he'd forgotten to clean up.

He looks down, but the robe is the right one. No glitter in sight, no dolls.

The door opens again, allowing another man inside.

He rushes in and then he kneels.

Ah. That's why they stared at me. Sirius skipped the kneeling.

Voldemort has a gift of making silence a tangible thing. Sirius can actually feel it pressing down on him and the others, the tension escalating.

Rodolphus, the only unmasked one- why bother, after all, if the meeting is held in his house- is stone faced.

Two more men come in, in quick succession, and after they both kneel and then find a seat, Voldemort finally speaks.

"It has come to my attention that we have a traitor in our midst."

Oh, if there was tension before- well, it's nothing to how the atmosphere shifts as soon as the word *traitor* is out of his mouth.

Sixteen men, Sirius counts as the rest are busy keeping all their attention on Voldemort.

Some at the other end of the table don't look as tense as others.

Sirius does his best to gauge their identities. A ring, a mark, a scar, anything, but there is nothing he can cling to.

He can tell some men are older, judging by the skin of their hands, but that's not much help, is it?

"You are my most trusted," Voldemort goes on, voice soft. "I would be..." his eyes move from one Death Eater to another, making some squirm. "*Saddened* to discover the culprit is sitting at this table, enjoying my confidence. Yet I would be remiss to dismiss the possibility."

He stands; half the table flinches.

How does that feel? To be so feared, to hold all these men in the palm of his hand.

Sirius inspires fear, too. When he's in a rage, when he snaps, he can smell the fear on those in his immediate vicinity.

But not like this- not proud purebloods, some of them old; not as he speaks softly.

Must be thrilling. Voldemort could do anything, and there would be no consequences.

Not that Sirius is terribly familiar with consequences; he hasn't faced many legal problems for the shit he pulled; arrests had been brief, more a bother than a real problem.

But he had faced *social* consequences. James or Remus being upset with him for some thing or another; Dumbledore's piercing gaze, his family disapproval. There's always a price he has to pay, however small.

Voldemort has no such issues. He's truly above any notion of punishment.

He starts walking along the table, stopping behind one man or another, no doubt making them sweat.

They all have their heads bowed, except Rodolphus, who stares at Sirius so intensely, Sirius is more bothered by him than Voldemort.

Fuck him and whatever crawled up his arse. Sirius can't look away from Voldemort, skin prickling with fascination.

Did he ever feel fear? How did he make all these pureblood swear loyalty to him? How does he make an entire room filled with no doubt powerful men shiver in terror?

Sirius knows why he's terrifying *now*- it's simple. His magic and his reputation.

But it mustn't have always been like this. Once, he had been a young man like Sirius.

Once, he'd been even younger, and Sirius saw him vulnerable and scared, hands shaking, breathing erratically as he changed his uncle's memories.

It is the Horcurx? But no- people can't *feel* Horcruxes. It just makes Voldemort immortal. It makes him unfeeling, colder perhaps. It can cause physical changes. But having a Horcrux is not something that would help him be who he is.

It's a byproduct, really. He was already so arrogant and confident that he sought to defy death, he thought himself capable to undertake rituals that would destroy most wizards that try them.

"I'd much rather believe a mistake has been made. A mindless slip of information, unintentional but no less damaging. Perhaps I am sentimental, but I chose to hope one of you confided in the wrong man or woman."

"My Lord," someone says, and Voldemort zeros in on him, pinning him with those red eyes, stops walking.

Sirius would not like to be on the end of that stare.

“I- may we know what was- if we know what information leaked, perhaps it would help to-” he trails off, loosing his nerve the longer Voldemort’s gaze is on him.

Silence falls again; after a handful of seconds, Voldemort resumes his small tour, walking past each Death Eater, deliberately, in no hurry whatsoever.

I need to learn how to loom like that. Sirius is a great loomer- his height helps him. And it helps Voldemort, too. Yet it’s more than this physical advantage.

It’s the fact that he doesn’t look at all upset; he’s not in a rage, the way Sirius is when he gets in someone’s face or stares them down.

No, Voldemort could just as well be strolling in the garden, smelling the roses.

Finally, he’s almost back to his seat, but he stops behind Sirius.

Which sucks. Having him at his back is never comfortable. He’d rather meet his eyes, gauge any intent in them.

“I want this solved by tomorrow.”

Sirius hears the soft rustle of a robe before Voldemort’s hand rests on his shoulder.

Not being able to look at Voldemort, Sirius looks at Rodolphus.

He is not happy at all, is he?

Rodolphus’ eyes, that are burning holes through Sirius, move up, presumably to stare at Voldemort. He looks almost... incredulous.

“Think well and hard if you might be responsible for our situation. If you let something slip to a wife, or a lover, or a friend. Maybe to a lower ranking Death Eater. I want to learn of any seemingly insignificant detail that might have caused this. If you come forward-” he lets go of Sirius, siting beside him, at the head of the table. “I am a reasonable man. We are all under great pressure, trying to win our country back from mudbloods and blood traitors. A momentary lapse in judgement is expected, even from the best of us. Dismissed.”

It takes people a couple of seconds to process the last word. Even when they do, some hesitate.

Sirius heard it well and good, so he moves to stand, but Voldemort grips his knee, under the table, forcing him to stay where he is.

One of the older men stands at the other end of the table.

“My lord,” he says. “We shall all do our part and think long and hard about anything we might have missed.”

Voldemort nods once.

That emboldens the rest to stand. They all kneel, before scrambling out of the room, some with more grace than others.

Voldemort lets go of Sirius' knee.

Sirius takes off the stupid mask. He hates the damn thing. He lowers his hood and shakes his head.

"Rodolphus?" Voldemort asks, because Rodolphus is still seated, and apparently he wasn't supposed to be.

"Since you mentioned traitors," Rodolphus says. "Why is he here?"

"Look, you red headed prick-"

Voldemort's hand is back on Sirius' leg, on his lower thigh now.

It's enough to make Sirius shut up.

"Are you questioning me?"

Rodolphus' jaw tenses. "I'm questioning *him*. And his loyalties. He's been with us for more than half a year and he's yet to convince me-"

Sirius shoves Voldemort's hand away. "I'm siting right here, you knob."

Sirius doesn't appreciate being talked about as if he's not even in the room. It's infantilising.

Rodolphus doesn't even spare him a glance, focused on Voldemort.

"My judgement should be enough to convince you," Voldemort says.

He didn't look angry during the brief meeting, but it's happening now; his face hardens in a way that does not bode well for anyone.

Danger, danger, danger, the air around him seems to scream, more than usual.

"We don't know why he decided to take the mark," Rodolphus argues.

For all his faults, Rodolphus is no simpering coward. He's no diplomat, either, to mince his words.

There's no fear in his eyes.

"I know," Voldemort says.

No, you don't. How could Voldemort know exactly why Sirius took the mark, when Sirius himself isn't too clear on it?

"Do you?" Rodolphus insists. "Are you *sure*? Did you check?"

He means Legillimency. Sirius bristles. He doesn't need anyone planting that idea in Voldemort's head.

Sirius is a good Occlumenes, but if Voldemort really wanted, he could rip apart through Sirius' mind with a bit of effort.

But Sirius irritation goes unobserved, because Voldemort *stills.*

It's bewildering. He's been still before, it's not like he was moving, but now his stillness is more evident, like the eye of a storm, where everything seems calm for a moment, but one knows in a second thunder will strike.

Even his magic, that always lingers around him menacingly, now disappears, as if it's gathering back inside him, before it snaps.

Don't snap.

He wanted to see Voldemort snap, he tried to provoke him for months, but he doesn't want him to do it now.

Not with Rodolphus. Sirius doesn't want to see Voldemort attacking Rodolphus.

He doesn't know what the fuck he'd do if he's made to witness that.

He stands swiftly, hoping to break the tension, to attract Voldemort's attention. He grabs his wand, too.

But Voldemort doesn't look at him; neither does Rodolphus.

"Get out," Voldemort orders, voice almost choked, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

Rodolphus stands as well, a vein bulging on his neck, pulsing visibly.

He marches out of the room, slamming the door shut with so much force, the wooden frame around it falls.

Great. Now I'm here alone with a pissed off Voldemort.

He can't be all that terrible, Sirius thinks, remembering all those harrowing tales of Voldemort torturing his men.

If he didn't do it to Rodolphus, or to Sirius on the dozens of occasions Sirius had given him…

It couldn't have all been true. Maybe the Death Eaters on trial exaggerated.

"Whatever happened, I didn't do it," Sirius says, but he knows Voldemort must know this already.

“Nothing happened.” Voldemort’s voice is still tight. He takes his eyes off the fallen door frame and looks up at Sirius. “There are no traitors in my inner circle.”

Sirius frowns. “I don’t understand.”

“I like to keep them on their toes. If they are constantly worried about traitors all around them, they are more unlikely to make mistakes or trust in the wrong people.”

Unbelievable.

Well, actually, now that he thinks about it, it is believable.

The Death Eaters are probably in a frenzy right now, double checking everything they said or did in recent weeks, making sure the ‘information’ didn’t come from them. Quite possible some of them will come to Voldemort and try to place imaginary blame on someone else, thus making Voldemort aware of every single conversation his men have with each other.

They’ll rat each other out, they’ll be even more careful with their actions in the future.

It’s quite brilliant, really.

“Rodolphus must know you do stuff like that, right?”

“Of course he knows.” Voldemort’s jaw ticks.

“So why would he say I’m a traitor? I don’t understand what his problem is. He’s behaving bizarrely lately.”

“Don’t you?” Voldemort tilts his head, regarding Sirius closely.

“No.”

“Curious.” Voldemort’s bad mood vanishes, replaced by a mocking smile. “Someone as *worldly* as you… it is rather obvious, I should think.”

“It can’t be as lame as him being jealous you’re paying attention to me. Right?” It can’t be that. Sirius respects Rodolphus, but he’d lose all that respect in an instant if the idiot would think this way, if he was vying for Voldemort’s favour. “I mean, he’s your most trusted man. Your right hand. He has plenty of attention.”

Voldemort stands, that mocking smile still pulling at his thin lips.

“I don’t pay him the same attention I pay you,” he says. “And he wouldn’t want me to.”

Well, of course he wouldn’t. Not like Rodolphus has a burning desire to get his arse handed to him every Tuesday, as he loses duel after duel.

“You’ll figure it out, eventually,” Voldemort says. “I admit, it is taking you longer than I imagined.”

Sirius does not like that. He's fucking *intelligent*. He figured out Voldemort's entire past, and he does not appreciate being made to feel like he's missing something.

"Oh, I will. You know I will."

Voldemort fixes the frame of the door with a wave of his hand.

"I am eagerly awaiting it," he says, glancing over his shoulder at Sirius before leaving the room.

Chapter End Notes

I know I am very late with this chapter, but I have a good excuse.
I was kidnapped by alines 👀
Joking aside, I had some real life issues to deal with. I am sorry for the long wait, and I hope you will enjoy it.
Please let me know if you do!
Thank you for reading ❤️

Oh, about the portraits, I know Phineas has a sentient one, but in this fic he only got it because every Headmaster has to, and I know Walburga has one, too, but I like to imagine she only did it out of spite.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Pass. Hard pass." Bellatrix wrinkles her adorably upturned nose as a man strolls past them.

"I find him quite handsome," Narcissa says, head slightly tilted.

"You find Lucius handsome, sister. You are clearly defective."

Narcissa rolls her eyes. "Lucius is handsome," she counters. "And you well know it. How about that one? The one with the cigar."

Bella cranes her neck, leaning into Sirius. "No. Too…scruffy."

"Really?" Narcissa smirks. "You usually like the dishevelled ones."

"*Stylishly* dishevelled." Bella shrugs. "Nothing stylish about that bloke."

"That one," Sirius suggests. "In the corner."

"The tall one?" Narcissa squints.

"Yes!" Bellatrix exclaims. "And yes! Clearly the winner."

Narcissa disagrees, eying the stranger with disdain. "He looks ready to inflict terrible violence."

"Exactly," Sirius and Bella say at the same time.

"You're hopeless," Narcissa informs them.

It's an old game, dating back since Sirius was too young to be allowed inside fancy gatherings, and he'd be left out in the hallways, babysat by the sisters.

Teenagers, fighting over who was the most handsome man around. Andromeda picked the kindest looking ones. Narcissa picked the richest. Bella liked the most dangerous.

They're in Malfoy Manor. Sirius wouldn't have come, but Regulus begged him.

"Mum is doing her best to marry me off!" he'd said, eyes wide. *"Last week she had a party at our county house, and she only invited her friends with daughters around my age. It was*

terrible, Sirius! And now she's roped Malfoy into helping her!"

Lucius invited foreigners, too. The entire floor is filled with them and their daughters. There are few other young men around- or, there are, but married men.

Rodolphus isn't there.

"Should I come?" Rodolphus asked when Sirius went to Bella to ask for reinforcements.

She waves him off. "No, no, darling! I don't want you to scare the children."

"What children? Rabastan asks. "There'll be kids there?"

"The girls, silly," Bella answers, linking her arm through Sirius' elbow. "The poor girls that are paraded in front of Reggie, so he can pick one like they're cattle."

"Can I borrow Rabastan?" Sirius asks. "I need more single men."

"I am certainly not going-"

"You are," Rodolphus orders his brother. "It's high time you start mingling with women of our status. You should choose a wife, and soon. Take him, Sirius."

"An excellent batch," Narcissa says, satisfied, eyeing the girls critically and sipping at her wine, getting ready to play host. "Lucius outdid himself. Surely, Regulus must find at least one of the girls pleasing."

"They look like little swans," Bella says, shaking her head in a disapproving manner. "Flocking together like that in their white dresses."

"That one is more like a goose," Sirius mutters. He points to Evelyn McNair. "Mean as fuck."

"I like her," Bella says.

"She's a menace," Narcissa whispers. "Appalling behaviour."

Evan enters, looking very put upon. He heads towards them. "You owe me," he warns Bella. "I just got out of these sort of parties myself. Father wants me engaged by the end of the year, and now you just gave him another chance!"

Bella waves it away. "You'll survive."

She really came through. When Sirius asked her to bring reinforcements, she took it to heart.

She even managed to bring over Barty Crouch Jr, who's in a corner of the room, staring at Bella adoringly, like a lost puppy.

"Sirius," Evan acknowledges him. "Happy to see you here."

"Ugh." Sirius makes a face. "Don't start."

Last they saw each other, Evan was trying to convince him to meet Voldemort, stars in his eyes when he spoke of his lord and how he'll fix everything.

"Alright, I'm off." Narcissa throws her hair back, plasters a cold smile on her face and heads to socialise with the guests.

"Where's the man of the hour?" Evan asks, adjusting his cufflinks.

Sirius snorts. "Mum is probably chasing him around Grimmauld. If only he'd have paid more attention, he'd have learned all my preferred ways of sneaking out of that house."

"Speaking of sneaking out, I think Rabastan ran off." Bella scans the crowd. "That little coward. I'll get him."

She marches off, determined.

Half an hour later, she still hadn't found him. She rejoins Sirius, an exasperated expression on her face.

"I sent Rod a letter. He'll find Rabastan."

"Soon, I hope. It's almost time."

The room is filled with people now; the pianist showed up, and he's taking his seat, flexing his fingers.

Evan is already in a deep conversation with some girls.

Another one had taken Crouch Jr captive.

Lucius is loudly speaking to some older men, singing Regulus praise. "He'd make a perfect husband," he keeps saying.

And then there he is, walking through the doors, dressed to the nines, in Black regalia.

Regulus' robe has their coat of arms blazoned over it; the buttons are made of star-shaped diamonds.

Sirius can't see the cufflinks from a distance, but he just knows they would have greyhounds engraved on them in heavy gold.

Mum really went to town, didn't she?

Regulus looks cold, confident, unbothered.

"He's all grown up," Bella sighs filled with nostalgia.

"Almost," Sirius says. "Look at his jaw; that muscle only twitches that way when he's very uncomfortable."

But if one doesn't know him, Regulus appears at ease. And he makes for a handsome sight. Lucius materialises at his side and drags him by the arm to meet potential fathers in law.

Their mother, however- her eyes find Sirius immediately, even if he's mostly hidden in a corner.

She is dressed in black, from head to toe, with no jewellery other than a brooch pinned to her robe. It's an old one; there are portraits in Grimmauld wearing it; portraits from the Middle Ages.

"What are you doing?" She comes down on him like a thunderstorm, a furious expression in her eyes. "Why are you here?"

"You know me," Sirius spits, sarcastic. "I can't miss out on a party."

Her left eye twitches.

"Why, I hear you threw a spectacular one at our country manor." Regulus said it was splendid; or it would have been if he wasn't trying to hide from the girls and their fathers the entire time. "I thought you *hated* that place."

"Low blow, low blow," Bella mutters at his side. And then, louder: "Hello, Aunt Walburga." Her voice is cold as ice.

His mother looks, impossibly, more pissed off with Bella than with Sirius.

He feels responsible for this coldness between them. Once, they got along great. He knows that before he was born, his parents used to take Bella with them on holiday, and they'd treat her like their own daughter.

But then he was born, he grew, and as he and his mother's relationship deteriorated, Bella took his side.

Sirius takes advantage of the stare-off between the two women, and he quickly walks away.

It's easy to spot his brother in the middle of a gaggle of girls, Lucius observing them from a distance with a satisfied smirk.

Regulus is smiling now, a very charming smile. His brother always could save face.

"Hello, ladies," Sirius says when he reaches them. "My, my, aren't you all looking lovely?"

"Hello, Sirius," Anita- or was it Amalia?- smiles up at him. A Selwyn. She must still be in Hogwarts, about to start her seventh year.

"What a surprise to see you here," another says.

"Why?" Sirius asks, offering a charming smile of his own.

An awkward silence. No one reminds him he ran away. They look a tad confused, but they are mindful of social dos and don’ts, so they politely keep their mouth shut.

The most proper ones, from the oldest families, glance at their parents, seated at the tables, questioningly, checking if they’re allowed to socialise with him.

The parents look just as confused as the daughters.

He slaps Regulus on the back. “I think mother wants a word with you,” he lies. “Go ahead, I’ll entertain the girls.”

“Excuse me.” Regulus offers a polite smile, and then quickly takes off.

“Bet you’re glad I’m here, Nastea,” Sirius says, nodding to the only Ravenclaw in the group. “You’re no longer alone between snakes. Beautiful snakes, of course.” He winks at the others.

Giggles rise in the air. The youngest ones blush, lowering their eyes.

He spends the next hour tracking Regulus all over the room, going after him whenever he seems trapped with a girl, or two, or *three*.

Evan does the same, running interference as much as possible.

Rodolphus shows up at one point, Rabastan trailing behind him, miserably, but not for long. Bella quickly directs him to a girl.

(-)

“Should we allow it?” Mrs Nott asks her husband after Sirius dances with their daughter.

He’s been dancing for some time now, doing his best to divert attention from Regulus.

He’s tired, and he takes a break by the bar, overhearing gossip about him.

“He’s a Black, too,” Mr Nott says. “The one with the vault and the seat in the Wizengamot, actually. I’d say it’s even better.”

“But isn’t he a blood traitor?” she whispers.

“Darling, with his name and that kind of money, he can be whatever he wants to be.”

How delightful.

(-)

“Regulus,” their mother calls, advancing towards them with a girl on her arm. A tall, intimidating man trails after them. “This is Astrid Kristiansen,” she says. “And her father, Thor. Astrid, this is my son, Regulus.”

“A pleasure,” Regulus says, taking her gloved hand and brushing his lips to it. “Sir,” he adds, a second later, shaking the man’s hand.

“Thor was a good friend of your father’s. They attended the Institute together.”

Both Kristiansens look at Sirius curiously, but his mother acts as if he isn’t there.

It irritates Sirius greatly.

“Oh, yes; I think I remember him mentioning you, sir,” Regulus lies.

Their father barely talked about his time at the Charms Institute. He only mentioned it was boring, but it was his duty to attend.

“Doesn’t Astrid look regal?” his mother asks.

“She does,” Regulus agrees, plastering a very believable smile on his face.

“Must be the crown,” Sirius hisses. “Wearing a crown tends to make one look regal.”

“It’s called a tiara,” his mother snarls at him. And then she forces a smile on her face, too. Much less credible than Regulus’. “This is Sirius,” she explains when the northerners keep looking at him, and she has to introduce him. Not that she does a good job. She’s supposed to say he’s her *son*, too, not just his name. “Regulus, why don’t you show Astrid around? Get her a drink? Non-alcoholic. She’s not yet of age.”

“Of course. It would be my pleasure.” He offers her his elbow, she takes it, and off they go.

“You’re importing women now?” Sirius scoffs when his mother drags him further away. “The locals aren’t good enough anymore? Merlin, half of these girls are foreigners-”

She opens her mouth, furious, but Bellatrix appears at their side. “Oh, my favourite song, Sirius! Come, let’s dance!”

(-)

“She grabbed my- *behind*,” Regulus whispers, scandalised, hiding between Sirius and Bella. “Stop laughing,” he snaps at them.

“Oh, dear Evelyn.” Sirius spots her in the distance. “She grabbed my arse, too, some years ago. Shoved me in a cupboard at Hogwarts and had her way with me.”

“She’s always been daring,” Bella says, proudly. “Good head on her shoulders, that one.”

“She has a *reputation*. Her father can’t find anyone willing to marry her,” Regulus mutters. “Oh, Merlin, no! She’s coming-“

“Calm down, calm down. I’ve got her. Go dance with Bella,” Sirius instructs over his shoulder, going to intercept Evy.

She’s almost two years older than him, but Sirius always sort of liked her; a Slytherin, yes, but a fun one.

“Are you going to stop growing, or will I need a ladder in the future?” she asks when Sirius bends to kiss her cheek. “Fancy seeing you here,”

“It’s my fucking cousin’s house, Merlin!” Sirius snaps, exasperated. He’s bothered so many people act as if he doesn’t belong there.

“Ah, and that temper,” she grins at him, a toothy thing. “So fiery. Much more interesting than that ice statue you have for a brother.”

“Feeling brave, aren’t you?” Sirius inquires, pulling her to him rather abruptly and leading her to the dance floor. “What with your daddy keeping an eye on you?”

“I’ll bet you twenty galleons you can feel me up without him noticing.”

Sirius throws his head back and laughs.

(-)

“Why are you doing this?” His mother ambushes him when he’s leaving the bathroom. “Why do you always have to ruin everything for Regulus? You can’t stand it, can you? Whenever he gets some attention, you have to come around and steal it!”

She looks mighty angry, cheeks red, scowling at him.

“Seems you answered your own question,” Sirius drawls. “Why ask when you already know, mother? Oh, right- you just like to hear yourself talk. Merlin knows you’re the only one to enjoy the sound of your voice-”

She slaps him.

Well, that didn’t take long.

Nothing to make him feel like a child more than a light, painless but humiliating slap.

“Go ahead,” she dares him. “Make me regret it!”

He’d promised her, long ago, on that awful night he ran away, that if she ever lifted a hand to him again, he’ll make her regret it.

Calm. Stay calm.

“I wouldn’t want to cause a scene,” he spits through gritted teeth.

“Please! Your presence already caused a scandal.”

“I have every right to be here. If anyone finds my presence scandalous, they can piss off.”

“He’s your brother!” she screams. Her voice echoes, but they’re far enough away that chances are no one will hear it. Not over the music in the ballroom. “Do you hate him that much-”

“Have you considered he doesn’t want to get married?” he screams back. “Of course you haven’t! It’s all about what you want!”

“He knows he has to get married! That’s what one does. And if he’d have an issue, he’d tell me!”

Yeah, right.

“He’s eighteen,” Sirius tries. “He just got out of school. Can’t you give him at least a year? Father didn’t get married so young; neither did Cygnus.”

“They weren’t in a war,” she says, and between all the hate in her eyes, he can see the fear. “Regulus is in one. And so are you. Our house needs an heir, and fast. Just in case.”

Sirius blinks at her, horrified.

“Our name must go on,” she adds, turning away from him.

(-)

“She’s rather beautiful, isn’t she?” Rodolphus asks him, appearing suddenly at their side.

Bella is there already, an arm around Sirius, trying to calm him down.

“Yes,” Rodolphus answers his own question, looking at Helena Edgecombe. “Grew up nicely.”

“Dear gods, don’t be lecherous. She’s a child,” Bella says, brows furrowed, glaring at her husband.

But Rodolphus is staring right through Edgecombe, completely uninterested. It seems he hadn’t even heard Bella.

“Proper family, but a little rebellious, no?” he moves his eyes to Sirius. “Just how you like ‘em. I’ve been talking with her father. I think you’ll make a great couple.”

“What?” Sirius and Bella ask at the same time. They exchange a look between them.

“Or that Selwyn girl,” Rodolphus goes on. “Right up your alley, Sirius. And there’s some Black blood in her family tree, no? She even looks a little like Bella- you like Bella, don’t you?”

“Are you drunk?” Bella demands.

“He must have had a stroke or something,” Sirius tells her, forgetting about his mum. “He’s acting really strange lately, I told you.”

“Oh, I know,” Rodolphus turns to them, looking like he had an epiphany. “Why don’t you marry that McKinnon girl? You’re already together.”

“*What?*” Bella’s furious, red splotches rising high on her cheeks. “Over my dead body!”

“Maybe the Imperius,” Sirius suggests to her. “You should have him checked out.”

“Think about it,” Rodolphus continues, insistent. “You’re both blood traitors, raging alcoholics with no family values. A perfect match! You’ll keep her safe that way. You want her safe, no? None of us would touch her if she were to become a Black.”

“Enough!” Bella slaps his shoulder. “That’s quite enough! I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I don’t want to hear another word! You’re supposed to marry off your brother, not my Sirius.”

“The Blacks are the oldest family in Britain,” Rodolphus snaps at her. “They should have an heir.”

“Has mum gotten to you?” Sirius asks, suspicious. He can’t imagine how his mum would have any luck in convincing someone like Rodolphus to do her bidding, but then she’s a force of nature when she puts her mind to it.

“They will,” Bella hisses. “Regulus will eventually-”

Rodolphus snorts, waves it away. “Sirius is the first born; everyone knows blood runs stronger in the first born, he should have a son-”

“Oh, dear gods,” Bella spits. “Where are you from, the last *century*? That’s nonsense!”

But Rodolphus ignores Bella, focused only on Sirius.

(-)

“Thanks,” Regulus says when the last guests are gone. Their mother departed long before that, and Bella and Rodolphus ended up in such a terrible fight, Lucius asked them to take it elsewhere.

Narcissa is somewhere with the elves, instructing them how to clean up; Lucius is in his office, paying off the singers.

“Anytime,” Sirius slurs. He’d indulged in the fine whiskey after his conversation with his mother. “If there’s booze and women involved, you can count on me.”

Regulus rolls his eyes.

“I think Goyle actually found a wife for his son. Saw him shake hands with - fuck it- with someone. They all start looking the same, these old geezers.”

“Well, at least someone had a productive night.” Regulus throws himself on the couch.

A long dead Malfoy woman gives them a disapproving glance from a portrait. There are many dead Malfoys all over the walls.

There are many dead Blacks on the walls in Grimmauld, too, even if they don’t speak. They are there. A *legacy*. An ancient legacy.

I live on in you, Sirius’ father said, shortly before he lost awareness.

Our name must go on, his mother hissed.

Sirius looks away from the portraits.

“That girl- the Norwegian- she was actually alright,” Sirius says, slowly. “I danced with her, and she was very pleasant.”

“She’s sixteen.”

“She’ll be seventeen in a month-”

“I don’t like her accent.” Regulus crosses his arms in a rare display of stubbornness and childlike behaviour.

Regulus hadn’t acted like a child since he was four.

Sirius sits beside him. “And that Nott girl-the older one, she’s alright, too. And of age. And her accent is just fine.”

“Her lips aren’t symmetrical.”

“Her -*what*?” Sirius asks, bewildered.

“They aren’t symmetrical.”

“Her lips are fine. More than fine.”

“Well, I don’t like them.”

“Then Seraphine-”

“One of her fingers is crooked.”

“You’re pulling my leg!” Sirius snaps at him.

“Why are you turning on me?” Regulus demands, eyes narrowed. “Did mother put you up to it?”

“No.” Sirius makes a face. “I’m just saying, eventually you’ll have to get married. You could pick one now and make it a long engagement. Any girl you choose would wait for you, we know that.”

“Or *you* could get married,” Regulus spits. “That will buy me some time.”

“Time for what? What do you need time for? Oh, Merlin!” His drunk brain comes up with an answer. “You’re with someone! And you think mother wouldn’t approve of her!”

Regulus goes red. Flaming red. It isn’t a good look, not on skin as pale as theirs.

“I’m not seeing anyone,” Regulus says, crossing his arms even tighter, defensive. He lowers his eyes.

“Of course you are! That’s why the ridiculous excuses. ‘Her finger is crooked’ really!”

“I’m not with anyone,” Regulus insists. And then, in a whisper- “I’ve never been with anyone.”

It takes Sirius long moments to put it together.

He’s aghast. “No way! Regulus!”

His brother gets even redder.

“Don’t make that face!” he threatens, even if he’s not looking at Sirius.

Sirius is a terrible brother. He’s been away, and he’s allowed his brother to finish Hogwarts a virgin. *Pure,* indeed.

“You’re supposed to save yourself for marriage.”

“Oh, gods be good. Stop! No wonder you’re so uptight!”

That's why his brother joined the Death Eaters. All those hormones running amok- he just needed a good lay, and all that pent up aggression would have been resolved.

"That's what you're supposed to do!" Regulus insists, glaring at the carpet. "And the girls- the *good* girls, at least, of good breeding, abide by that. Even you know touching one of those is prohibited."

Sirius remembers his father's instance that Sirius is not to besmirch anyone important.

"So who am I supposed to- to- you know," Regulus continues, strangled.

He can't even say 'fuck'.

"Come on! There are plenty of women outside of the Sacred Twenty Eight."

"I'm not touching mudbloods, or half-bloods, or blood traitors!"

Well, that would shorten the possibilities.

"Or easy girls like Evy."

Sirius punches him in the arm. "Cut that crap. She's not easy."

"She had her way with you in a broom closet! And there are rumours she slept with Rabastan, too."

"She's just having fun," Sirius says.

Regulus stands up.

"No, no." Sirius grabs him by the robe. "Where are you going? We need to solve this."

"There's nothing to solve! Forget it!"

"No, there is. I'll get you laid, don't worry!"

"Sirius, let me go," Regulus growls at him.

(-)

"He's a virgin!" Sirius tells Bella, an hour later, bursting into her Manor.

He found her still fighting with Rodolphus, but as soon as Sirius came in, Rodolphus took the chance to escape Bella's ire.

"My brother. My *own* brother," Sirius complains. "The tragedy!"

“I’m not surprised,” Bella mutters, still glaring at the spot her husband just left.

Sirius goes to the liquor cabinet, fills a glass for himself and one for Bella.

“That’s why he’s not getting married; he’s afraid he won’t know what to do with a wife.”

“Draw him instructions,” she hisses, shoulders still tense, but she takes the drink from him.

“And he refuses to even look at a half-blood or a muggleborn, and you know how pureblood princesses are, so- I don’t know. I’ll take him abroad. A weekend trip to Italy or Spain, find a pureblood or at least pay someone to pretend to be a pureblood for the night-”

Bella finally smiles. “Oh, I’m not missing this.”

“I’m not taking you! You’d tease him mercilessly!” He bites his lip. “Though- I might need to burrow some gold. I don’t think I have enough left to fund a trip abroad.”

She rolls her eyes, taking a seat. “Stop being an idiot. You have gold. The Black vault is yours and-”

“No.”

“Sirius-”

“No.”

She sighs, takes a generous sip of her drink. “I’ll give you a key to mine, then. You can serve yourself whenever you-”

“I’m not taking money from Lestrange,” Sirius says, insulted.

She rolls her eyes. “I’ll give you some from my dowry, then. Merlin knows where that is, but I’ll track it down. Better?”

“Yes. I’ll pay you back.”

“Whatever.” She takes another sip and then looks at him rather carefully. “You were awful to Walburga tonight.”

“*I* was awful? She slapped me!”

“Did you have to throw the country manor in her face like that? I’d have cursed you if I were her.”

“It’s just a holiday house.”

“It’s a house where your father took his mistresses.”

Sirius empties his glass in one go. “She never cared about that.”

Bella looks incredulous. “Why do you think she hates that place, then?”

Sirius doesn't answer.

"Of course she cared."

"No, she didn't," Sirius argues. "She hated him, she avoided him like the plague when he was home, and when she'd have to sit by him, she'd yell and complain about *everything*. It was an arranged marriage, and she never wasted an opportunity to say so, to remind all of us how she didn't want to get married and have kids, so-"

"Everybody knew about his *indiscretions*," Bella points out, still suspiciously careful with her words and demeanour. "That would hurt anyone's feelings, having people knowing one's husband is sleeping around! Not to mention uncle Orion sometimes took you with him to the house while the women were *there*."

Sirius shrugs, goes to refill his glass.

"You came home once and told her you'd rather have that Brown woman as a mother because she was nicer."

"Well, she was," he spits out.

Mrs Brown always treated Sirius with the utmost care, giving him sweets, cooing over every little thing he did on the rare occasions that he saw her.

Bella shakes her head. "I don't blame you; you were just a little kid. But that was horrible; uncle shouldn't have-"

"Shut up," he warns her.

She sighs. "You know I loved him. I still do. He was a great uncle, but he was the worst husband-"

"Shut up," he says, again, more forcefully.

"I don't know how you can possibly defend that." She stands, walks toward him. "Never mind that it was wrong, but you suffered so greatly that he was never home-"

"He was working!"

"During the week, yes. But during the weekend…"

"She drove him away!" Sirius says, slamming his glass on the cabinet. "And we're done talking about it."

"Alright." She lifts her hands in surrender. "In any case, that's why your brother is the way he is. He saw all that shit, and, unlike you, he swore he'd never be like that. Auntie must have insisted he is to be loyal to a wife."

"That's well and good, but he's not married. And he won't get married a virgin, Merlin! I'm not letting that happen!"

(-)

“Stay,” his father says when Sirius tries to leave the office after his mother.

He was so close, hand on the doorknob.

He turns back slowly, looks somewhere at his father’s shoulder, unable to meet his eyes after his mother just spoke, in great detail, about how she found Sirius with the Rosier cousin.

And then the silence falls over them, and Sirius knows he’s not supposed to talk first, his father always tells him silence breaks lesser men, and Sirius is supposed to appear aloof, confident and wait for the other to break.

Only this is father. There will be no breaking.

“You know I like girls, too,” he whispers. He hopes his father pays attention to him, unlike his mother; that his father remembers the obsessive crush Sirius had on Marietta the past summer. “I’ll marry and have an heir,” he adds, when his father doesn’t answer.

More silence. Sirius tries not to squirm in it.

“I know,” his father finally says.

Sirius breathes easier, and this time he looks at his father.

“You’ll do your duty, I have no doubt. I might even let you pick a girl for yourself, as long as she’s from a good family.”

“Thanks,” Sirius spits, a little too sarcastic.

“You should be grateful,” his father answers, tone as even as always. “Most boys your age are already engaged. I didn’t force that on you.”

Sirius swallows. He knows. He really should be thankful. Abraxas didn’t ask Lucius’ opinion when he picked Andromeda for him; in fact, Abraxas signed the contract with Cygnus first, and only after that he informed Lucius about his bride-to-be.

Other boys met their wives at their wedding reception.

“I know. Thank you,” Sirius says, more sincere this time.

His father nods.

“I hear you’re awfully friendly with a mudblood in your year. Mary something.”

Was it Regulus that snitched on him? Probably.

"I-" Sirius says, but he doesn't know what to add, how to defend himself. He bites his lip and quickly berates himself about it. Blacks shouldn't hesitate or bite their lips. His father hates that. Sirius shouldn't look down, either.

Under no circumstance is Sirius supposed to lower his eyes, put himself in a submission position. Yet if he meets his father's eyes when they are in a disagreement, then his father will take that as disrespect. He settles his gaze on his father's nose.

"I understand," his father says. "You're at that age, and I am glad you know better than to dishonour a girl with a noble name; so there are scant choices for you to entertain yourself with, aren't there?"

Sirius nods, relieved. He thought he'd be served with a lecture about muggleborns, but surprisingly, he got away with it.

His father was never as strict as his mother in regards to Sirius' friends. He didn't get upset Sirius was sorted into Gryffindor; which is why Sirius went ahead with the sorting, knowing it would piss off his mother but not anger his father.

His father once confessed, when Sirius was very young, that the hat almost placed him in Gryffindor.

Of course, the hat never even mentioned Gryffindor to Sirius, it wanted him in Slytherin, but Sirius never told that to anyone but Peter. He didn't even tell Peter, exactly. Mostly alluded to it.

Father was never bothered about Sirius being friends with James, what with the Potters being a relatively old and rich pureblood family, even if filled with blood-traitors. He was accepting of Peter, even if Peter is not well off at all, and he comes from a newer family.

Remus, though…his father doesn't approve. "Poor half-blood," he once called him, but Sirius insisted Remus was a good friend, and his father let it slide when he saw how determined Sirius was about it. He even received Remus, along with the others, inside Grimmauld, for Sirius' birthday parties.

"As long as you understand this Mary is temporary," he warns Sirius.

"I understand," Sirius says.

"Good. You know what would happen if you get a mudblood or half-blood pregnant."

"I know."

"You must be careful."

"I am," Sirius says, more and more uncomfortable with the subject. "May I go to my room?" he asks. "I'm rather tired."

His father ignores him.

"Regarding your other….interests," he says, a mild expression of distaste gracing his features. And that brief curl of the lip hurts Sirius more than his mother's screams and insults. It makes him feel dirty. "This Rosier boy."

Sirius stiffens.

"If you must indulge, then you will be discrete about it. You are my son, and I would like for you to be happy, but you are not just my son. You are the son and heir of House Black. Duty comes before personal preferences. Do not shame our family."

Just like that, Sirius snaps. It's getting harder and harder, with each passing year, to obey every ridiculous demand of his father's. To stand there and nod, and say 'yes, father', with a blank expression. To let his family decide everything for him.

"Perhaps I'll take Rosier to the country house," Sirius hisses, meeting his eyes, fury chasing away the adoration he has for his father, the need to please him. "Now, that's discrete, isn't it?"

Sirius wants to yell that his father is fucking women of questionable repute at their country house all year round and then forces his mother to host balls in that place during the summer. He'd like to demand to know how would kissing a boy bring more shame on their family name than his father sleeping with women outside of his marriage, only he can't quite bring himself to say that, even as angry as he is.

No reaction. His father looks at him, as calm as ever. When he speaks, his tone is soft, with no inflection to it.

"One more word, and you will not be allowed to leave the house for the rest of the holiday."

Sirius' jaw ticks. He opens his mouth, angry and hurt-

he reconsiders at the last second, and that hurts too, bothers him tremendously lately, that he has to back off, that he has no control in that house.

"Go to your room. Now."

Sirius makes sure to slam the door behind him as hard as he can, though it only makes him feel weaker. Childish.

His father never slams doors, never loses his temper; it's his mother that pulls stunts like that.

And there she is, with Regulus, getting out of the living room as Sirius marches past it.

"I hate you," he tells her. "I hate you with all my heart."

"What happened? Regulus asks, and Sirius turns to him.

"Spineless snitch." He hits Regulus over the head, making him stumble.

"You animal!" Their mother gets between them.

"If you ever open your mouth again about what I do at Hogwarts, I'll pull your tongue out, you hear me?"

Regulus looks disorientated, eyes wet and wide. "I didn't do anything!"

Guilt tries to creep up on him when he sees the side of Regulus' jaw reddening.

But he also feels better when Regulus takes a step back, frightened. Sirius feels like he has some control, some power.

"Who told father about Mary?" Sirius snarls at him, even as his mother shoves him away from Regulus.

His brother looks away.

But then he hears the door to the office opening, and the little power Sirius felt flies away. He runs up the stairs.

"He hit Regulus!" his mother's shrill voice follows him to the second floor. "For no reason!"

"He has his reasons," his father says. "It doesn't look bad, put some ice on it, you'll be fine."

Sirius turns in his bed; he barely slept at all, twisting and turning until he woke Marlene up. He can hear her downstairs, messing around with his guitar.

He showers, Bella's words fresh in his head. It's not often she tells him he's awful.

"You're going out again?" Marlene asks from the couch. "I made breakfast."

"I won't take long," he assures her.

"Where are you going?" She eyes his distinctively wizard attire, nothing muggle on him.

"To see my brother."

She backs off after that, face softening.

"Bring him over. I made waffles, and this time they came out right. I promise."

She smiles, proud of herself. She looks happy. It makes Sirius smile, too.

"I'll be right back," he promises.

"Alright. I charmed them, anyway. They'll still be hot."

(-)

He doesn't Apparate straight inside; he knocks. Kreacher makes him wait.

I can't wait to give you to Voldemort, Sirius thinks when the elf finally opens the door.

Sirius walks past him. "Tell mother I want a word," he orders.

Kreacher mumbles to himself but does as he's told, taking his sweet time, slowly climbing the stairs.

He waits for her in the kitchen, which smells heavenly; it's too late for them to have had breakfast; lunch, surely. He checks his watch.

Yes, lunch it was.

He sits at the table, and either Kreacher is delaying, or now it's his mother that's making him wait, but he waits for quite some time before she finally makes her way to the kitchen.

"What do you want?" she snaps, shoulders straight, nose in the air.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says it fast, like pulling away a splinter. "For last night."

She gives him a suspicious look. She knows he's not in the habit of apologising; neither is she.

"Nothing I'm not used to," she says, hostile. "You shouldn't have bothered coming over."

"Can you sit, please?"

"No."

"Fine." Sirius stands. He goes closer to her and looks straight into her eyes. "I wanted to tell you that Regulus will be alright," he says, determined. "With the war and everything. There's no need to worry. He'll be fine. I'll make sure of it."

He takes her hand, holds it firmly between his, even when she tries to pull it away.

"I swear, mother. On my magic. He'll survive this."

Her breath hitches. Many emotions flicker through her eyes, one chased away by the other.

"He'll survive, and he'll marry and all of that. You don't need to pressure him into it. There is time. I want you to understand this, to *believe* it. He will be alright. I will protect him."

He lets go of her hand after giving it a little squeeze.

He walks past her, to the door-

“And you?” she asks, stopping him in his track. “Who will protect you?”

He doesn’t turn to look at her, staring ahead.

“I don’t need anyone to look after me,” he says, and starts climbing the stairs to the entry hall.

“You never did.”

That’s a lie, and they both know it. He can hear it in her voice, in the way she’s trying to convince herself, absolve herself from all her failings as a mother.

He keeps walking.

(-)

He eats his waffles with Marlene, lies to her that they are excellent.

And they are, in a way. Perhaps not the best waffles he had, not like the ones Kreacher makes, but at least these don’t taste of pressure and bitterness and duty.

They taste like someone’s trying, like someone cares enough to try.

They go for a ride after, with no destination in mind, just the wind and the freedom of it, the only choices he needs to make are whether to take a left turn or a right one.

They end up at a lake, and Sirius fucks her there, in the wilderness that surrounds them.

It’s a nice day.

When she has to go to work, Sirius doesn’t want to be alone, so he heads to Godric’s Hallow.

“I need a break, James,” he says, honestly. “I need something fun and simple.”

James gives him a careful look; he knows Sirius rarely uses words like ‘need’.

“We can get Peter and go to a pub?” James asks. He turns to Lily. “You wouldn’t mind, love?”

“Of course not,” she says, gently.

“I’m glad you came.” James smiles at him, throws an arm around Sirius’ shoulders. “You do need a break from Voldemort and all that rubbish.”

Not quite. Voldemort is fine. In fact, Sirius can hardly wait to see him Tuesday.

He needs a break from his mother and brother. He doesn't even want to think about them, refuses to do so. He knew it was a mistake to get back in contact with her, to return to Grimmauld. He knew it would *hurt* and stir up things from the past.

He doesn't regret it, per se. It's just…too much.

Sirius chooses a muggle pub because he doesn't want to be Black for the day, doesn't want people to see him and judge him or make assumptions about him.

He's Padfoot, out with his mates, acting like idiots, like the young men they should have been, instead of soldiers in a hopeless war.

James and Peter needed it, too. Sirius sees their faces relax as the hours pass by.

They all have worries, and it's nice to forget about them for a little while.

Sirius and James coach Peter into trying to pick up a girl, and they have the greatest fun with it, laughing almost to tears.

Even Peter, shy and a tad humiliated by the rejection, finds amusement and, after a few drinks, he tries it again, with another girl.

If the empty seat at their table hurts, they pretend it doesn't.

Sirius knows James talks to Remus, that he joins Moony on full moons. Peter muttered something about some letters being exchanged, but that was that.

He spends the following day with Marlene and her family, charming her mother, who generally disapproves of Sirius but has started to accept him somewhat. She comes from the old ways, from the Twenty Eight; a Fowley.

Marlene has some cousins from that side of her family running around as Death Eaters. Another thing they have in common.

The father, famous blood-traitor, is mostly silent. Marlene said he'd never truly recovered after the death of his eldest son. He picks at his food and barely participates in the conversation.

Marlene's sister likes Sirius, and she tells the funniest stories about her apprenticeship under Dumbledore.

The brother hates Sirius, Auror that he is. He arrested Sirius a couple of times in the past, and he's best mates with Gideon, so Sirius doesn't even bother with him. He doesn't respond to the subtle barbs aimed at him- the bloke is a right prick, but he's Marlene's brother, and Sirius knows all about *that*, so he refuses to be anything but polite.

He still feels some vengeful glee when the man's son, just nine years old, says Sirius and his bike are 'brilliant'. Sirius taught him how to play football last they saw each other- or at least the version of football Sirius remembers from the mugglebrons at Hogwarts- and now the boy says he wants to be a football player.

The dead brother, the oldest, another Auror, killed by Death Eaters, left behind a sixteen-year-old daughter. Sirius remembers her from Hogwarts, an angry, rebellious kid, the spitting image of Marlene. She idolises her aunt, dyes her hair the same shade of red, wears heavy make-up and leather. She doesn't want to become an Auror, clearly holds some resentment towards the men and women that she thinks had failed to protect her father. She wants to join the Order instead, and asks Marlene about it constantly, even if Marlene denies the existence of such Order.

(-)

Sirius can't quite believe it when he's misled into coming to Lestrange Manor, only to walk into a situation similar to the party at Malfoy Manor.

Only this time, his mother had nothing to do with it; the party isn't for his brother.

It's for Sirius, even if Bella seems to believe it's for Rabastan.

Mostly the same crowd, only Rodolphus invited some less reputable girls, too, from lesser families that Lucius would have never allowed step foot in his house.

Rodolphus aggressively sends girls Sirius' way, more than he bothers for his own brother.

And by now people have heard Sirius is *'practically back home'*, apparently. He's been seen in 'good' company enough- with Lucius, with Lestrange, with Bella.

"Just a conflict with his mother," Sirius overhears Rodolphus talking with old Mr Rowle. "You know Walburga; anyone would run away from that, really. But he's no blood traitor. I vouch for him."

It's not the fathers that Sirius worries about; those don't approach him, watching him with suspicion. It's not the daughters that give him problems, either. Sirius doesn't mind talking to them.

It's the mothers. Those freak him out, because Sirius doesn't know how to deal with them. With the men, he can- and *is*- aggressive to the point of almost violence. But with the mothers and grandmothers- well, he's not sure how to get rid of them, how to combat their sneaky ways, and sweet smiles, and *'be a good lad and keep an old woman company, will you?'*.

He'd flee, but then Rodolphus would mock him and call him a coward. Sirius doesn't want to leave the Manor, tail between his legs.

So he decides to hide around. Just for half an hour until he's drunk enough to deal with the crows.

Another group of witches is heading his way. He turns and quickly walks through the labyrinth of corridors.

The Lestrange Manor is one of the gloomiest ones Sirius had ever seen, with long, practically never ending hallways, shadowy, cold stone surrounding him and the occasional hideous statue.

No one would dare barge into Rodolphus' office, he's quite sure. That should provide safety.

When Sirius tries to open the door, it's sealed.

Great. Bypassing magic put on the house by its master is close to impossible, but Sirius tries anyway.

He tries a trespassing curse picked up from a book at Grimmauld that attempted to eat his face whenever he opened it.

The door glows brightly as it takes effect, but it remains shut.

Sirius kicks it in frustration, like a complete fool.

To his bewilderment, it opens.

Huh?

He hears heels on stone in the distance; the hags giving pursuit, and he dashes through the door while he still can. Old magical houses are temperamental. He doesn't question it too much.

He closes the door behind him, and casts a locking curse of his own, also learned in the face eating book.

He breathes in relief. Finally, he escaped-

"Good evening."

Sirius bumps his head into the door before he turns, wand up.

Voldemort is sitting behind Rodolphus' grand desk.

Sirius lowers his wand, though every instinct screams at him to keep aiming it at Voldemort. He's not one to startle easily, but finding Voldemort unexpectedly in a dark room, the only source of light coming from the dying flames in the fireplace, makes his heart beast faster.

"What are you doing here? I mean-" he quickly corrects himself. "I didn't realise there was someone inside."

"You thought the door opened because you *kicked* it, then?" Voldemort asks.

Sirius shrugs, flustered.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Oh, fuck. What if he thinks I snooped in to steal important parchments from Rodolphus to give to Dumbledore?

“Hiding,” Sirius says without thinking.

“Hiding?” Voldemort leans back on the chair, the fingers of his right hand tapping on the armrest. In this position, shadows cover half his face. “Brave Gryffindors hide? I thought you are fearless,” he mocks.

“I’m hiding from women. Old, bitter crones that try to sell their daughters to me. Give me battle any day, but I’m not facing *that* if I can avoid it.”

Stop talking.

“They remind me of mum. Terrifying.”

“Should I infer I am less terrifying?” Voldemort is in good spirits, it seems.

“Far less.”

“Then peel yourself from the door and have a seat.” Voldemort gestures at the armchair in front of the desk.

Sirius hadn’t realised he’d backed himself into the door; his body must have unconsciously tried to go as far away from Voldemort as possible. Irritated, he walks to the desk, putting as much confidence as he’s able into his steps.

He sits, and now he’s blocking the little light that was reaching Voldemort.

Great. He can hardly see the man.

“I take it the party isn’t to your taste?”

“I hate family gatherings,” Sirius says.

A candle lights itself on the shelf to their right. Sirius refuses to feel relief, but his discomfort lessens slightly now that he can keep an eye on Voldemort’s wand hand.

“I was under the impression most people here aren’t your family.”

Sirius snorts. “We’re all related. I can walk in every Manor in Britain- even some in Europe- and I’ll find family members.”

“How terrible,” Voldemort says. Sirius can’t discern if he’s being sarcastic or not.

“Quite,” he answers.

“You have my permission to hide here,” Voldemort offers, charitable.

“Thanks,” Sirius spits, making sure his tone doesn’t sound thankful at all.

“You are welcome. I shall defend you if the crones find you. You see, I am not afraid of them.”

“You have no reason to be,” Sirius spits. “No one would try to marry their daughters off to you.”

Maybe you should leave.

No way. If he leaves, Voldemort will think Sirius is uncomfortable.

You are.

Shut up.

Silence falls as minutes trickle by. Sirius won’t break it, even if it is so eerie to have Voldemort just sitting there, looking at Sirius.

It’s the lighting- or lack of lighting, that’s throwing him off. The cabin they use on Tuesdays is always bright.

Yet even Voldemort’s red glare doesn’t compare with the way his father’s eyes used to stare Sirius into submission.

Back when he was in his father’s office, he would have never thought a day would come when he would be thankful for all the anguish he was subjected to.

But he is thankful now, when he can meet Voldemort’s eyes head-on.

They might be red, but they are remarkably warm. Nothing like the ice cold gaze of his father.

Voldemort is amused. There’s no threat of immediate violence.

“They wouldn’t. I don’t have a dragon guarded vault in Gringotts’ underbelly.”

Sirius snorts. Like that would be the only problem.

You don’t have a name.

“I don’t have one of those either,” Sirius says.

“Lucius seems to believe you do. And he is never mistaken when gold is involved.”

“If you’re hoping I have money to contribute to the cause, you’re wrong. I only have uncle’s Alphard charity, and I use it to buy my sustenance. And speaking of sustenance...”

He waves his hand, and a bottle of something flies out of a drinking cabinet, landing smoothly in front of Sirius.

He conjures a goblet for himself and fills it up.

Voldemort smiles, which makes him more terrifying somehow. “I don’t need your gold, Sirius.”

“Good. Because it’s not my gold.”

“If you say so.” Voldemort sounds sceptical.

The initial discomfort has passed; he gets more comfortable in the chair.

“How did you get along with uncle Alphard?”

“We didn’t. But he’d bribe me, occasionally, when I’d catch him doing something he shouldn’t have been doing.”

“Like the teachers would do anything to a Black,” Sirius says. “Especially in those days, when Dumbledore wasn’t the Headmaster.”

“It wasn’t the teachers he was worried about. He didn’t want his sister finding out about his behaviour and reporting back to their father.”

Right.

“As if I’d ever talk to Walburga voluntarily,” Voldemort goes on.

Sirius smirks. “I thought you don’t hide from women.”

“It was for both our benefit. I’d have ended up in Azkaban if she’d enraged me enough to-”

He stops himself short of saying ‘kill her’.

“-do something regrettable,” he finishes.

“I haven’t seen proof of this infamous rage,” Sirius says. “You’re the most patient man I know,” he adds, honestly.

If he puts up with Sirius… *no one* does that.

A smile. “I wasn’t as patient when I was younger; my temper got the better of me on occasion.”

Will I grow more patient with age? Less impulsive?

He finds that unlikely, but he can hope.

The silence that falls now is less filled with tension. Sirius drinks in it, studying Voldemort, who studies him in return.

“Do you sleep?” Sirius blurts out, like a moron. Who asks that, really?

Voldemort looks at him, one eyebrow lifted, expressing amusement. And Sirius gave him such a great opening, Voldemort could mock him mercilessly for it.

“Not very well,” he says, instead.

Whatever Sirius expected to hear, it hadn’t been that. It’s just so- *honest.* Like an admission he’s not a god, but just another man that finds it hard to sleep.

It makes Sirius uneasy; he’d rather have been mocked for asking stupid questions. He’s more and more uneasy with every passing month, with every occasion in which Voldemort fails to react in a manner Sirius expects.

When he’s uncomfortable, he acts like a prick. It’s like a gut instinct, like a shield against any emotion or thought that would force him to reconsider his views on the world.

So Sirius reverts to what he knows best. Taunting. “Conscience keeping you up, huh? Who knew you’d have one of those?”

Voldemort smiles, only irritating Sirius more.

“The war keeps me up,” he says, just as calm as ever. “I know it’s all a joke to you, but for us in charge of it, it isn’t as simple. Someone has to plan it.”

“Make Lucius do it. No one loves a plan more than that man.”

“I’m sure you must have heard that if you want something done right, you better do it yourself.”

“Funny,” Sirius says. “Sounds like good advise, and yet I never see you on raids or missions or anything like that.”

Except that time in Diagon, but that was only because he was called to rescue the Death Eaters.

Voldemort leans back. “Perhaps I don’t want things to go well sometimes.”

Infuriating. Also- *intriguing.* “You could end this war, if you wanted,” Sirius says what he thinks, what he realised that day in Diagon Alley when Voldemort destroyed an Auror division with no effort.

“Your faith in me is touching.” Voldemort sounds mocking now.

Sirius stares at him, bites his tongue so he won’t blurt out something stupid or dangerous again. He rather prefers they return to their banter.

“Well, while I don’t have the benefit of experience that a long life gives you, I know a trick or two. If you want to sleep easy, you can just get drunk. Problem solved.”

“Is that so?” Voldemort tilts his head.

“Better than any potion, really.”

“Perhaps I’ll try it,” Voldemort says. He reaches over and snatches Sirius’ goblet from his hand.

“Now?”

“Let it never be said I do not accept council,” Voldemort answers with a smirk.

“Well, then.” Sirius conjures another goblet.

He’s going to get the dark lord drunk.

Sounds exciting.

“Where are your cigarettes?” Voldemort asks, hand extended, palm up.

Sirius groans.

(-)

“If only I’d have a deck of cards, I’d teach you how to play poker,” Sirius says a little while later. “You have the perfect poker face, anyway. It was practically made for it.”

Voldemort waves his wand; a deck of cards materialises on the desk.

“Where did you summon these from?”

“I didn’t.”

They must be summoned. One can manipulate matter with magic with a wave of a wand, enough to create a goblet, a piece of fabric, water, fire. Something simple.

For an entire deck of cards, though- Sirius takes them in his hands, and they are perfect, images and all.

No. No way he just made them on the spot. They must be summoned from somewhere.

Otherwise, the *intent*, the focus, the power that would go behind creating all this in the blink of an eye-

Voldemort takes the cards from him. He shuffles them with ease and deals five cards to Sirius.

“What are you doing?” Sirius asks dumbly.

Voldemort smiles. “I am going to teach *you* how to play poker.”

(-)

He's too drunk to do the math accurately, but he guesses he lost about a hundred galleons so far.

This time, I'll win.

"Where did you learn how to play?" If he wasn't so surprised, he'd be furious.

Is there anything this man can't do?

"A homeless man," Voldemort says, eyes on his cards, inscrutable. "He'd loiter around the orphanage and persuade young boys into stealing for him."

"Delightful." And then: "Orphanage?"

"It's a place where-"

"I know what it is," Sirius clarifies. He'd read a muggle book about a boy that was in one. "I just didn't…" he didn't know Voldemort was in an orphanage. He didn't imagine it.

Magical children go to distant family if their immediate one dies off. Even if there is no distant family, a practically impossible feat in their small world, they'd go to friends of the family.

But now that he thinks of it- yes, the Gaunts didn't raise him, and he knows the Riddles didn't either, so it makes sense.

"I was born in one and stayed there until I was of age."

Sirius doesn't know what to say to that. The book he read made it sound appalling. But it can't be all that bad, can it? Surely, it was exaggerated in order to sell the story.

"And a homeless man taught you to play poker," he says, eventually, just to get over the orphanage situation.

No wonder I keep losing with cards like these, he thinks, trying to focus on the game, though his mind insists on focusing on Voldemort instead. He exchanges four cards to a slightly more satisfying arrangement.

"It was a productive partnership. He was old and slow, lost an arm in the Great War. I was nimble, with quick fingers. I'd steal pocket watches and bracelets, but I was too young to sell them, so I'd give them to him to sell." He frowns, lightly. "I can't remember how or when, but he was the one to introduce me to the game."

“He did a bloody good job,” Sirius mutters. He’d like a cigarette, but they’re gone. Voldemort is partly at fault for it.

“You have to know when to hold them; when to fold them,” Voldemort says. He looks up from his cards and smiles at Sirius. “The best lesson, however, is that you have to know when to walk away.”

He displays a full Royal Flush on the table.

“Rubbish,” Sirius says, drinking straight from the bottle of whiskey. They’ve polished the first- well, mostly Sirius did that, and now they’re at the second. “Blacks don’t walk away. Another round.”

Voldemort laughs, gathers the cards and shuffles them.

“How much do I owe you so far?” Sirius slurs.

“I don’t count my earnings when I’m still playing. There’s time for that when the dealing is done.”

Sirius can barely see his cards. But he’s having a great time, regardless of all the losing. Voldemort is more relaxed than usual; maybe because he, too, is somewhat drunk. Not properly, not like Sirius, but he’s undeniably a tad intoxicated.

“You should send that old geezer a fruit basket or something,” Sirius says.

“He’s dead.”

Sirius snorts. “Happens a lot around you, doesn’t it?”

“What low opinion you have of me, Sirius.”

You’re a murderer, a liar, a thief, and probably a cheat, too. It can’t be a coincidence Sirius gets all these shitty cards, can it?

“I found his body one winter morning. He either froze to death or had a heart attack.” Voldemort raises his shoulders in what could count as a shrug. “Took people two days to notice him. And he was right on the street. Hundred of men and women passed him by. They just didn’t see him. No one in London has time for homeless men and hungry orphans.”

“That’s horrible,” Sirius whispers, an almost overwhelming sadness piercing through his drunken brain; or maybe it’s only enhanced by his inebriated state.

It’s just that he can see it. He can see a young boy finding this man slumped on the street. Maybe he tried to wake him up, shake his shoulder, call his name.

It makes his heart constrict.

“That’s life,” Voldemort states, matter of factly.

“How old were you?”

“Nine, or just about.”

Nine. Fuck.

Sirius often complains he had a complicated childhood, what with his strict parents, stringent punishments, and the unreasonable responsibilities placed on his shoulders as the heir of such a powerful family.

He’d compared his childhood to James’ or Peter’, and he’d been jealous, because it felt like they had the time to be kids, when Sirius didn’t.

But this-

Orphan. Having no family, no warm meal- *nothing.* Forced to steal just to survive and finding men dead on the street, noticing how no one cares, people just passing along without a glance spared to someone lying there on the pavement.

Did Tom Riddle think that could be him, one day? Did he watch from the shadows, imagining his future, worrying if he’ll have where to live once he aged out of the orphanage?

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Voldemort regards him shrewdly. “It’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“It must have sucked.”

Voldemort tilts his head, curious.

Not many people- in fact, probably no one feels sorry for him, Sirius imagines. Who would, really? He is not the type of man to inspire pity.

“It was a lesson, as is everything else.”

Sirius stands, the room fuzzy around the edges. He carefully heads to the couch.

He sighs when he sits. Far more comfortable than the chair.

He rests his neck on a tall pillow, raising his feet on the coffee table.

“I thought Blacks don’t back away.”

Sirius closes his eyes. “Just resting for a second.”

He doesn’t feel like playing anymore. He feels sad. With his eyes closed, he can see the dead gambler even clearer, a child with brown eyes beside him.

I’d walk right past them, too. The horrifying realisation dawns on him with the force of a punch to the gut.

Sirius doesn't often notice those 'below' him, either. He wants to blame his parents for it, and they're certainly to blame, but then he's not a child anymore, is he?

He's been living with the good guys for years now. He should have gotten better.

James wouldn't notice homeless men, either, a voice comforts him. And James is a good guy. The best.

The couch dips beside him, under Voldemort's weight. Though he can't possibly weigh much.

"You owe me a small fortune." Voldemort's voice is very close.

Sirius doesn't open his eyes. He's drifting to sleep in a haze of alcohol and guilt. And the couch is so comfortable. This is always his favourite moment, why he most likes getting shitfaced. The moment when he's so drunk, he can fall asleep.

"I don't think I have enough gold."

He'll have to do something about that. Soon. Very soon. Hard to worry about money, though. Not when he never had to before. Not when Bella said she'll help him out.

And it's impossible to worry about anything in that state.

"A man is only as good as his word. Unthinkable not to pay your debts."

"You've been bumming fags from me for more than half a year. We'll call it even."

Sirius' pillow disappears from under his neck. He makes a noise of protest, but Voldemort just pulls him until he's lying down on his side, suddenly lounging on the couch.

It's actually even better this way, he figures out, stretching.

He thinks Voldemort's thigh is not even an inch from Sirius' head.

You really shouldn't sleep with Voldemort in the room.

He tries to stay awake, to will himself to stand and go home.

Just another minute.

He forces his eyes open. He can see the sky through the window from that position.

"That's my star," he says, pointing to it.

A childhood habit. He always got terribly excited when night fell and he could see the Dog Star.

"I know."

"The brightest," Sirius says, closing his eyes again. "Do you know my family's origins?"

“One hears rumours,” Voldemort answers from somewhere in his vicinity.

“The first Sirius- not the one you’ll find in genealogy books- he married his sister, and apparently someone, down the line, decided that was a bit too much incest, even for us, and excluded them from the family tree. In any case, he married his twin sister.”

“Bellatrix,” Voldemort says; he sounds amused.

Sirius sighs. Of course he’d have heard about it, even if not many do.

“No one knows where they came from; just these beautiful twins, with hair as dark as night, and eyes as pale as the moon. They called dark magic ‘black magic’, way back then. So people took to calling them that- Sirius and Bellatrix Black, because they were fond of the Arts.” He shrugs, though it’s hard to manage from his position. “They were probably some poor peasants. But they figured out a way to do astral magic. It’s lost to the world now. Died long ago.”

“It didn’t,” Voldemort says, and Sirius cannot suppress a smile.

“No one’s been practicing it for a millennium. No need, since we invented wands.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

Sirius’ smile only grows larger. “You think you know everything, don’t you?”

“Not everything,” Voldemort allows. “But most things.”

“Bet you don’t know the legend, though. The one behind the twins.”

Silence. “I can’t say I do.”

“Ha!” Sirius slurs, triumphant. It fills him with satisfaction.

“So?” Voldemort asks a couple of minutes later. “Won’t you tell me?”

“No. You’re not a Black. It’s only told to Blacks.”

“I’ll ask Bellatrix. She’ll tell me.”

Sirius opens his eyes just to roll them. He sees Voldemort, sitting close to Sirius’ head, staring down at him.

“Fine,” he allows and closes his eyes again. “There was this witch, long, long ago. There were no magical communities back then, and the muggles hated her, pushed her away from their own communities. She was very lonely. So, every night, she’d pray to the Moon to help her find a wizard, to guide her to one.” Sirius wets his lips, shifts around a bit, getting more comfortable.

He remembers his mother telling him the story. They were somewhere in the Pacific ocean, on a boat, around Australia, and he’d been sea sick, so she took him up on the deck, and

made him look at the stars, speaking softly, rocking him so that he couldn't feel the sway of the boat anymore.

"The Moon answered. 'You'll have your wizard, woman,' It said. 'But, in return, I'll have your firstborn.' The witch didn't understand what the Moon would do with a flesh and blood baby. But the Moon wanted to be a mother, you see. She is the Mother of magic, but she wanted a baby for herself."

The muggles have their God and their Satan, but wizards have the Mother and the Father, one to reign over the night, the other to hold the day.

"The witch agreed. And, soon enough, the moon guided her to a wizard. She fell pregnant. She gave birth to twins. Skin as white as milk, hair as dark as night, eyes as silver as the moon. But the witch had blonde hair and dark eyes- and so did the wizard. He became enraged. 'Who is the father?' he asked her, holding these too-white babies, with their strange eyes. He didn't believe they were his. In a fit of rage, he killed the witch, and he took the children to the forest and abandoned them there. The poor things cried, and so the moon halved itself as if to cradle them. And when the children were happy, it became full again, to provide them with more light. It named them Sirius and Bellatrix, and gifted them with the brightest and the biggest stars in the sky, respectively, to always do their bidding. And, to punish the wizard that left them in the forest, the Mother cursed him to always turn into a wolf when the moon is full, so he can keep company to the children, warm them with his thick fur."

It's certainly a better, more pleasant story than two random, incestuous dark wizard and witch, children of no-one, starting a family and practicing magic so evil, it bound the stars to their bloodline, for generations.

He opens his eyes, only to be faced with Voldemort's.

Blood moon, he thinks, fascinated with all that red.

"Quite the story," Voldemort says, voice soft and low. "The hubris of the Blacks never ceases to impress me. Children of the moon…"

Sirius smiles, lazily. "Children of the moon or not, we do have a unique connection to astral bodies."

Voldemort looks at him so intently, it makes Sirius *hot*.

"No Black has ever died under the night sky, you know? And we're all born at night."

"I know. That is remarkable magic. No one was able to recreate it."

Sirius smiles again. "And no one will. I told you, all the knowledge to perform astral magic is gone from the world."

"Yet one hears that gift remains in your family. Passed down, generation to generation, only to firstborn sons from the direct line."

Sirius winks at him. “Just rumours. And it’s not any firstborn from the direct line,” he says. “It has to be the firstborn son of *two* Blacks.”

“So the gift will die with you,” Voldemort states.

Sirius feels miserable for a second. There is no Black left he can marry.

“I told you, it’s just a rumour repeated by old men in dark corners. No gift to speak of. You don’t really imagine I can do astral magic, do you?”

“I don’t imagine,” Voldemort says, tilting his head. “I know you can.” He smiles. “When I was a student at Hogwarts, Binns taught us about Parseltongue, another ancient gift, lost to the world. And yet there I was, a Parselmouth.”

“Parseltongue is nowhere near as ancient as astral magic.” Sirius snorts. “Salazar is practically recent history compared to my ancestors.”

Voldemort says nothing to that, just keeps staring at Sirius.

Fuck, I’m so drunk. Sirius shifts again, turns his eyes to the window. “What kind of magic was that anyway, to make someone able to speak to snakes and to pass it on to their children?”

“I don’t know,” Voldemort answers. “I had no family to tell me stories and legends of my lineage.”

Sirius closes his eyes, and once more, he sees the brown-eyed boy, abandoned in London, scared maybe. Hungry. The heartache returns full force.

He hears a peal of soft laughter, and it chases away some of the gloom.

“What?” he mumbles.

“I’m picturing Greyback’s face if he’d hear your little story, that the moon created werewolves to serve the Blacks.”

Sirius would laugh, too, but then he imagines Remus’ face when hearing that myth, and it isn’t as funny, even if it wasn’t real; his family definitely isn’t responsible for creating werewolves.

But the Blacks have a long, real, history of oppressing werewolves, however.

He’d rather not linger on that thought, and it’s easy to discard it, his inebriated brain jumping from one thought to the other, until they exhaust Sirius.

He can’t be sure if he falls asleep or not, if he keeps waking up and drifting back. He can’t be sure if ten minutes passed or two hours, before there’s suddenly someone else there, speaking rather loudly.

“I’ll take him home.” Rodolphus’ voice.

“He isn’t bothering me,” Voldemort responds.

“He should sleep in his own damn house, not my own. I’m taking him.”

Sirius feels Rodolphus’ strong grip on his shoulder. He tries to shrug it off. He’s a bit disoriented. *Am I dreaming?*

And then the hand leaves, rather abruptly, a short yelp coming from above him.

He’d never heard Rodolphus *yelp* before. Ludicrous. He must be dreaming.

“If you don’t want him here-” Voldemort. There’s no mistaking that voice. “Then I shall take him to his house. No reason for you to ignore your guests. Go back to the party.”

“I can leave on my own,” Sirius mumbles, more or less intelligibly. Only he doesn’t try to move.

Just another minute. He needs only another minute.

“You’re *still* standing there, Rodolphus,” Voldemort says, voice shifting into something dangerous. “Return to your party.”

Yes, go away.

Heavy footsteps are heading away, but then- they’re coming back. Sirius groans.

“No,” Rodolphus says. “He’s drunk. I’m sorry, my lord, but I won’t leave him here like this.”

Even fucked up as he is, Sirius can feel the tension in the room.

“What are you implying?” Voldemort’s voice raises the hairs on Sirius’ neck. It resembles a growl more than English. “What, exactly, do you think would happen to him?”

“I’m fine,” Sirius spits. Rodolphus probably imagines Sirius, drunk as he is, would say something stupid and provoke Voldemort into killing him. He sits up, opening his eyes. He must have slept for a while because the candles had burned out, only the ambers from the fire providing some dim light.

“He’s my brother in law. I can’t just-“

“He is not.”

“He’s family.” Rodolphus’ voice resembles a growl, too. He looks tortured. “I’m sorry, my lord. But he’s *family*. Come on,” he adds, and he grabs Sirius’ shoulder again, helping him to his feet.

Voldemort looks positively deadly. Sirius had never seen him as murderous. He’s staring at Rodolphus, who’s supporting Sirius’ weight, his arm around Sirius’ shoulders.

For a second, Sirius is sure Voldemort will kill Rodolphus. He's so convinced, that Sirius tries to go for his wand, but he's clumsy-

The second is gone, and then he's half dragged to the fireplace.

What a brave man, he thinks. For Rodolphus to turn his back to Voldemort- to Voldemort in that state- quite brave. *Should have been a Gryffindor.*

He throws Floo powder in the fireplace, and the flames roar to life, green and bright.

Rodolphus tugs at him until they're both inside. The last thing Sirius sees are Voldemort's eyes, glinting a furious red.

"What the fuck are you doing, you absolute idiot?" Rodolphus demands, as soon as they are in Sirius' living room.

The hard floor connects painfully with his back when Rodolphus shoves him hard in the chest, and he loses his balance.

"The fuck is your problem, mate?" Sirius yells back.

"That's our lord. The *dark lord*," Rodolphus sounds hysterical. "What is going on?"

"Huh?" Sirius tries to sit, utterly confused.

"Don't play dumb. What's going on between you?"

"Nothing is going on." Sirius doesn't understand what Rodolphus wants from him.

"Nothing? Your head was practically in *his lap*!"

Was it? No, it wasn't. It's just Rodolphus exaggerating.

"Look, it's not my fault he likes me better than he likes you," Sirius says. "And no wonder, what with your stupid, jealous temper tantrums."

Rodolphus is upon him again. Sirius struggles weakly, but he's truly too dizzy to do it properly, and there's no fighting this animal in such close range. Sirius might be big, but Rodolphus is a mountain of a man.

He lifts Sirius in no time-

"Let him go!"

Oh, fuck!

They both turn their heads to see Marlene in the doorway, wand out, hair wild around her head, dressed only in one of Sirius' T-shirts.

Sirius grabs Rodolphus' wrsits. "Leave," he warns. "Peacefully. Right now. Marlene, get out."

“The fuck I will! Let him go, Lestrange.”

“Relax,” Rodolphus spits out. “I’m going.” And then he bends his head closer to Sirius’ ear and switches to French, whispering in a low voice. “You should marry her if you’re so worried about her well-being. And you should make sure you don’t *cuddle* with the dark lord anymore if you don’t want to find her dead in a ditch somewhere.”

He pushes Sirius away, turns on his heels and goes back through the fireplace.

“What was that about?” Marlene is beside him instantly. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Just a -well, that’s how Rodolphus is. Family dispute.”

“What happened?”

“Marlene, I have the worst headache I’ve ever had in my life, and somehow I’m still drunk, even with the hangover. Drop it. Let me go to sleep.”

(-)

Moody arrests Igor Karkaroff on the first day of September. By the time Sirius wakes up, the news is all over the papers and the radio. Apparently he was caught torturing people. The Aurors took him straight to Azkaban, not even processing him through the holding cells in the Ministry.

“He’s a high ranking Death Eater,” Dumbledore tells the Order. “The most important catch so far; if he talks, many others will fall.”

Sirius’ stomach knots in fear. Everyone around him is excited, giddy, smiles all around the table.

He only feels dread.

“Lestrange is trying to delay the trial,” Doge says. “He’s looming threateningly around the Ministry.”

“We must make sure the trial happens as soon as possible.” Dumbledore is the only one not smiling. “I advised Alastor and Crouch to strengthen the guards around Azkaban, and have someone stand by Karkaroff’s cell at all times until he goes to trial.”

“It’s Azkaban,” Gideon says, grimacing. “It’s already safe, no one can infiltrate it-”

“I know you don’t fully believe me,” Dumbledore somehow doesn’t sound reproachful about it. “But the Dementors are on Voldemort’s side. If he orders it, they could kiss Karkaroff.”

Skeptical looks all around. They've been through this before. Dumbledore insists Voldemort somehow corrupted the Dementors, that are bound by incredible magic to obey the Ministry.

"Then why haven't the Dementors helped the captured Death Eaters escape?" James questions.

"Because then everyone would finally accept what I've been telling you for years," Dumbledore says, patiently. "He's saving that revelation for when it will make a difference. Perhaps for a high-ranking captive, like Karkaroff or Lestrange. But mark my words- Voldemort got to the Dementors, long ago."

(-)

As soon as the meeting is over, Sirius goes straight to Grimmauld.

He finds Regulus and his mother in the living room, both reading the Prophet, Karkaroff's face sneering at him from the first page.

"Does he know about your mark?" Sirius asks, getting straight to it, not wasting any second on pleasantries.

Regulus looks very pale. "No. Only family knows-"

"Family and Barty," Sirius spits. His brother and Barty are the best of friends.

"Karkaroff doesn't know," Regulus insists. "I'm sure. I didn't even know he was a Death Eater."

That doesn't mean much. But Sirius doesn't even want to consider it. He looks at his mother; she meets his gaze, worried.

"If anyone from the Ministry- *anyone*, not just Aurors, comes even close to our- to your front door," he corrects himself. "You will order Kreacher to take Regulus away. You don't waste a second, you understand?"

"Oh, come on," Regulus spits, insulted.

"Yes." She nods, without hesitation, for once not arguing with him. Sirius feels a tad better. "Where should Kreacher take him?"

"Mum! I'm not going anywh-"

"Scotland."

"Nothing will happen, and even if it would, I'm not running away. That's absurd-"

But Sirius doesn't wait around to hear whatever childish complaint Regulus has. He trusts his mother and Kreacher can subdue him and get him out of the country if need be.

His next stop is Lestrange Manor.

While he believes Karkaroff wouldn't have known about Regulus' mark, he surely knows about Rodolphus'. Everyone knows. But they never had proof. If Karkaroff tells the Aurors, however- that will finally give them an excuse to come after Rodolphus.

And who knows what Karkaroff knows about *Bella*, what evidence he could provide that incriminates her?

He finds her in her bedroom.

His heart beats wildly; he feels a headache forming at his temples, there's a shake in his hands he can't really stop, no matter how many times Bella assures him everything is fine.

"Don't worry."

Don't worry. Is she insane?

Of course, she is.

She uses that obnoxious baby voice as she reaches up to pet his head. "You're so adorable when you go into your overprotective little fits." She pinches his cheeks.

He shoves her hand away. She walks away with a laugh.

"If he speaks of Rodolphus, the Ministry will descend on this house and-"

"And what?" Bella asks, unconcerned, trying on a pair of earrings, turning her head to the left, and then to the right, checking herself in the vanity mirror. "Too gaudy," she decides, pulling them off and throwing them on the floor. She opens another brand new jewellery box and tries on another pair. "Much better," she declares, pleased. "Don't you think?"

And people tell Sirius he never takes things seriously, that everything is a joke to him. Clearly, they haven't met Bella.

"Can you fucking focus for a second? This is bad, Bella!" he snarls at her.

She turns to level him with a stare, letting go of her hair that cascades around her shoulders in thick, perfect waves.

"Relax, will you?" she demands, standing again. "I'll be alright. Even if Karkaroff talks, even if they come for me- the dark lord will allow no one to take me."

Sirius doesn't even know what to say to this blind, ardent faith she has in Voldemort.

"Now, can you help me pick something for tonight?" she smiles at him, pulling at his hand to drag him toward her dressing room. "I'm hosting the charity with Cissy, and she said she'll be

very cross if I don't take it seriously."

A charity. He looks at her, trying to find the place where the woman that dons a mask and kills people or tortures them or Merlin knows what else she does, meets the woman that raised Sirius, that loves her family and hosts charity events, unconcerned she might end up in Azkaban at any time.

It's the Black blood. They are all a little off, he's heard that his entire life and he can attest to it from personal experience, but she is more affected than most in his family.

"I can't even look at you right now," he whispers, shaking his head.

She rolls her eyes, gives an exaggerated sigh. "Fine, then!" She throws herself dramatically on her bed, covering her face. "Oh, Sirius," she whines. "What shall I do? I am trembling in fear for my uncertain future. I am wrecked with anxiety, rendered senseless with doubt. Please, hold me, my noble hero! Protect me!"

She peeks at him from between her fingers. "Better? Is that an appropriate reaction?"

"You're fucking barmy!" he snarls at her, heading for the door. As he slams it behind him, he hears her laughter.

He wants to slap her, to bash her head into a wall, but he also can't leave her alone in case someone comes for her.

He goes downstairs and paces through the grand living room, wand securely in his hand.

Maybe he's the one exaggerating. Surely, she wouldn't be *this* unbothered if she thought there was a chance she'll get in real trouble?

She would be, the part of him that knows how utterly without fear she is reminds him.

But at least Rodolphus would be concerned. He's not the sanest man either, but he has more logic than his wife and loves her dearly. If he thought she was in danger, he'd be there.

Sirius doesn't leave her side. He borrows some clothes from Rodolphus, transfigures them as best as he can and accompanies her to the stupid charity thing she has going with Narcissa.

He stands in a corner, eyes scanning all the doors, fingers closed around his wand, hidden in the pocket of his robe.

"Control your expressions," Lucius hisses in his ear at some point. "It's important to look carefree right now."

Lucius looks carefree; Sirius observed him smiling, dancing with Narcissa as if he has no concerns in the world.

"I can't," Sirius confesses. He's never been very good at keeping his face in check; his mother often complained that he's too expressive.

"Everything will be alright. *He*-" The way Lucius puts emphasises on ‘he’ lets Sirius know it's not Karkaroff he's referring to. "Is in Bulgaria as we speak."

"What for?"

"For Igor's family- a sister and a nephew. He'll bring them here. As soon as that happens, Rodolphus will make sure Igor's jurist will let him know about it."

Sirius feels awful because he should be horrified Voldemort is out there taking some poor woman and her son hostages to keep as bargaining chips. Instead, he's relieved.

"What if Karkaroff doesn't care about his sister-"

"He cares. And even if he wouldn't-" Lucius shrugs. "He wouldn't dare betray us. He knows that a fate worse than Dementors waits for him if he does. He won't talk, Sirius. So stop looking so paranoid. We can't bring suspicion to ourselves. We must appear happy that the Ministry took in such a dangerous man, don't we?"

Lucius steps back and smiles. "Have a drink," he says, snapping his fingers, summoning an elf.

(-)

Days go by, but Sirius can’t calm down, even if so far nothing happened.

Voldemort doesn’t call him for their usual Tuesday meeting, and that upsets him. A part of him that Sirius tries hard to suppress knows he’d feel reassured if he spoke to Voldemort; if he made Voldemort promise Bella is safe.

Voldemort might be a liar, but that pathetic part of Sirius would believe him, the same way all the other Death Eaters believe every word he says.

But Voldemort doesn’t call him, presumably busy. Not the first Tuesday after the arrest, and not the second one, either.

It makes Sirius angsty.

They hold the trial; Sirius doesn’t know if Rodolphus simply let them have it, if he had bought Voldemort enough time to kidnap the Bulgarian family and made sure Karkaroff became aware of it, or if the Wizengamot simply managed to overrule Rodolphus and his people inside the Ministry.

Karkaroff doesn’t talk. He doesn’t say a word, and he receives a life sentence for his crimes.

(-)

It's Sirius' fault. He's always been quick to lash out, and he's quicker than ever these days, especially with the tension he's been under.

He doesn't even have the excuse of alcohol since he only had a beer at the time.

They're at the pub, trying to have a good time when some idiots snap at Marlene because she bumped into them on her way to the bar.

Marlene, being Marlene, snaps back, and it escalates rather quickly. She's a brilliant fighter, she certainly doesn't need Sirius' help, and it hasn't even gotten to a proper fight, just insults flying left and right, yet all that doesn't matter to him.

Deep down, he is itching for a fight - he always is, but especially since he hadn't got to practice with Voldemort for two weeks- so Sirius makes his way through the crowd, wand drawn already.

As soon as he sends the first guy flying into a wall, Sirius feels better, all the pent-up worries forgotten.

It feels so *good*; he can't stop, not even when all the men are on the floor, not even with Marlene pulling at his shoulder, screaming at him to stop.

Even when James intervenes, when he places himself between Sirius and the rest, Sirius doesn't think he *can* stop.

It's Aurors that finally put an end to it, and Sirius is lucky, very lucky that Marlene and James threw themselves at him bodily; otherwise, Sirius would have attacked those as well, and that would have ended in an arrest for sure.

As it is, Frank just orders James to take Sirius away.

"He attacked half the pub!" Someone screams, outraged. "Arrest him! Arrest him, you cowards! You'll let him go just because he's a Black?"

It isn't because he's a Black. It's because he's an Order Member, and Frank is also an Order member.

"From what I understand, he was only defending his girlfriend," Frank says, somehow keeping a serious face. He refuses to listen to the witnesses that insist Sirius was the first to cast a curse.

Marlene is bent over a man, trying to stop the bleeding and stabilise him until the other Healers arrive.

Sirius is still in a fighting mood, even if his mind has cleared a tad. He's silent, doing his best to keep himself in check, and finally allows James, Peter and Lily to take him away.

Once home, James turns on him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he yells at Sirius. "You almost killed them! For what?"

Sirius doesn't answer, heart beating wilding in his chest, pumping rage through his body.

James keeps yelling; Sirius knows he's most upset because he was close enough to hear Sirius call one of the men a 'filthy half-blood'. But James won't acknowledge that out loud, especially not in front of Lily, that's trying to calm him down.

But he makes his feelings clear when he turns around and grabs a goblet engraved with 'Toujours pur' and throws it at the wall.

"James, that's enough," Lily says.

Sirius still refuses to talk, sits on his couch, tense as a spring.

"Yeah, let's all calm down," Peter suggests quietly.

James won't calm down. Sirius does his best not to listen to any of it, not to let words like *'unstable'* and *'I thought you grew out of this'* and '*I won't put up with this'* get to him.

It takes him back to that night, after the Shrieking Shack, when James told him he's just like his family, when he threw Sirius out of the Hospital Wing and told him he doesn't even deserve to stand in the same room as Remus.

Peter sitting quietly at his side, eyes lowered, serves to only cement the comparison to that night.

And then Marlene comes home, dress stained with the blood of the men she helped.

Apparently, if Sirius won't defend himself to James, if Peter only shows support for Sirius quietly, she has no such qualms.

"Get the fuck out, Potter!" she barks after a few minutes. "You don't get to yell at him in his house. Fuck off! Right now, or I'll make you."

"Stay out of it," James snaps back.

"The fuck I will! Get out, and best if you get off the high horse you're on, too."

"James, let's go," Lily says, in that final tone of hers. She grabs James' arm and drags him out.

"You too, Peter," Marlene adds, less sharply, when the Potters have departed.

Peter stands, pulling at the hem of his shirt. He quickly pats Sirius' stiff shoulder.

"See you later," he mumbles, heading to the door.

"Don't ever talk like that to my friends," Sirius says as soon as they're alone. He finally looks up, glaring at her.

She glares back. "Oh, look, he remembers how to talk! Glad to know you'll let Potter walk right over you, but you can speak to me-"

"Whatever happens between James and I doesn't concern you."

Her jaw goes off, muscles twitching all around. "Am I allowed to have an opinion on you losing it on those clowns, your Majesty? Using me as an excuse to do it?"

He stands. "You're allowed your opinions, but I don't want to hear them. I heard enough from James."

"I see. Did he mention the part where you called people filthy half-bloods? The part where you told that bloke he shouldn't dare even touch a pureblood like me, let alone insult me? Or did Potter keep silent on that one, lest he upsets his wife?"

"He knows I say stupid shit-"

"That's not stupid shit. That's bigotry. Bigotry that's thrown our world into a civil war."

"Please," Sirius spits out. "The bigotry was here for two thousand years, and we were doing just fine. It's Voldemort that threw us into a war, not someone yelling out nonsense in a harmless fight-"

"Harmless?" Marlene's eyes widen. "Sirius, you almost killed someone! If I wasn't there to patch him up, he wouldn't have made it to St Mungo-"

Sirius walks away. She follows him up the stairs, but as soon as he enters his bedroom, he slams the door in her face and locks it with a dark spell she has no hope of knowing how to undo.

(-)

He knows they are right. He knows he shouldn't have said those things- he's more sorry for what he said than for cursing the men to an inch of their life.

It's just that it's an easy way to hurt- Sirius knows blood-related insults dig deeper than any others. And when he's that angry, he wants them to hurt, so it just comes out.

It's not like he thinks half-bloods are less, in any way. Even if he'd want to think that, he wouldn't be able to, not with men like Dumbledore and Voldemort around.

Even Snape, annoying little shit, is more accomplished with magic than plenty of purebloods his age.

He truly doesn't believe they are less. And yet-

Yet there is something there- there is a reason 'filthy half-blood' or 'mudblood' comes out of his mouth with such ease when he's too angry to filter himself, isn't there?

Probably his family's fault. They raised him and his brother to feel superior and-well… hard to unlearn, he supposes.

Not that you tried that hard to unlearn it, did you?

Sirius shakes his head.

Andromeda is just as bad, he reassures himself. And she's no bigot. She married a muggleborn and has a half-blood daughter, for Merlin's sake, and yet she still clings to that sense of superiority.

He feels rotten; he can't convince himself in either direction. He can't convince himself he's not a bigot, and he can't convince himself that he's not superior due to his Black blood, either.

It's terrible. He's ashamed of himself, and he's also angry because *why* should he be ashamed of himself? He is better than those men at the pub; he is stronger.

Might made right, his father's voice rings in his head.

'Don't let Dumbledore shame you into renouncing your birthright,' Bella said when Sirius was no older than fourteen, and he'd argue with her that it's not right to mistreat muggleborns, that they are just as magical as anyone else.

Sirius knows Dumbledore is correct. He completely believes muggleborns, half-bloods and purebloods are all magical and belong in the same world.

Yet he feels he and Marlene and James are owed something- they are purebloods, and they could all survive this war without getting involved. If all purebloods had abandoned the muggleborns and half-bloods, they'd all be dead already.

So Sirius gets annoyed when their efforts are not appreciated. When a half-blood smarts off to Marlene, who is risking her life to help them.

When they hate Sirius, who could have chosen to live a comfortable life, with no murders and spying and pain, but instead chose to speak out for them.

He bites his tongue until it bleeds when Lily says *'purebloods, what can you expect?'* when a pureblood does something shitty, and she lumps them all together with such ease, remarkably alike the blood purists that lump muggleborns together without thought.

He always wants to remind her that it was purebloods that defended her at Hogwarts from the Slytherins that would try to hurt her. Especially in their first year, when she didn't know how to defend herself, it was always purebloods in Gryffindor speaking out for her, getting into fights with older Slytherins.

And yet he also knows it's fair for Lily to lump them together like that, that she has her reasons.

He's just so torn.

Worst of all, James is not speaking to him. Sirius could never stand that. Each day spent in silence is torture.

Because if he doesn't have James, if James stops being his friend… then Sirius would find himself in the Order, with people that despise him, and for what?

All he did after he ran away from home was stay by James, follow him. Sirius felt he had lost his family, so he made James, Peter and Remus his family. He joined the Order to keep them safe, but mostly James. He's risking his neck spying for Dumbledore to keep James and his wife safe.

So what's the point anymore if James pushes him away? Remus had already abandoned him. Peter will be fine; after all, he's a pureblood, he didn't marry a muggleborn; he isn't anyone's first target.

Just apologise. He'll forgive you. He always does.

Yet this time, Sirius finds it harder to grovel to James. Maybe he's punishing himself, staying away from everyone, being alone, because he *deserves* to be alone. He's an arsehole, and James shouldn't forgive him.

He doesn't even drink, just wallows in his misery, torturing himself with too much reflection, analysing every defect he has, all the ways in which he's a terrible, bigoted, selfish man.

"They will cast you away," Voldemort says softly. "You do not belong with them. They will never accept you. You will never be good enough for them. They will see the darkness inside and flinch away. You cannot contain darkness once it starts spreading. It will claim you in the end. Embrace it. I will give you free rein to be who you were born to be, unconstrained."

Blood traitor, they call him. Shame of his family.

Blood purist, they call him. Shame of Gryffindor.

"You betray yourself," Voldemort whispers.

(-)

He's in a lousy headspace when Tuesday comes and his mark burns.

Sirius feels defeated. James' silence always unnerved him.

Voldemort can instantly tell something's off about him- more than usual, that is. He makes the wrong assumptions, inviting Sirius to sit and assuring him Bella and his brother are safe, that the Karkaroff business has been solved.

Sirius does believe him, like he knew he would.

In the silence that he'd been sequestering himself in during the past days, Sirius thought a lot about Voldemort. About Rodolphus' odd behaviour, his insistence Sirius should marry, his determination to get Sirius out of the office where he was sleeping- *'your head was practically in his lap'*.

On one side, Sirius thinks it's laughable that Rodolphus would believe that Sirius' pretty face would make Voldemort be careless about him and the whole double spy thing.

Oh, Sirius is beautiful, and plenty of people lost their heads about him, but this is *Voldemort*. He's not a hormone-driven, immature twenty-year-old.

But then another part of him reminds Sirius that Rodolphus knows Voldemort far better than Sirius does, that he's been at Voldemort's side for almost a decade, if not more. No way to know exactly when Voldemort got to Rodolphus, but it's been long ago, in any case.

Sirius doesn't know what to believe or what to feel about it. He's just too tired. He doesn't want to deal with Voldemort fancying him. That's just- it's too much to take in.

It's uncomfortable. Because Sirius- well. Now that stupid Rodolphus planted that in his head, Sirius started examining *why* he is far too fascinated with Voldemort, more than it is normal.

It was easy to dismiss before, what with Voldemort being a man and Sirius' mind refusing to accept those types of attractions on most days. And then Voldemort is not exactly the most handsome or attractive man around. He looks half-dead; he's thin as a rail; there's nothing desirable about him, is there?

Only, of course, he does make Sirius hot every time they are around each other. It's the power Voldemort holds; his confidence. His demeanour. His brilliance and charisma.

But since Sirius usually finds himself attracted to bodies and faces, shallow shit that he is, he hadn't considered he could be seduced by *who* someone is, not just the way they look.

Which was a mistake, because there's clearly something there, isn't it?

Sirius had been flirting with him without realising it. And it must have looked more like flirting to Voldemort, who Sirius noticed never touches anyone. But Sirius touched him- the odd, usually meaningless type of interactions he has with his friends all the time, only for someone like Voldemort, sharing a cigarette, sharing a goblet, sitting close to the other wouldn't be as meaningless as it is to Sirius, who never had many personal boundaries.

What am I supposed to do now? Sirius thinks, staring at Voldemort. *What is Sirius supposed to do with this knowledge?*

In the state that he's in, the answer is, apparently, getting himself killed.

Dying would spare him of loads of issues, and it would serve James right, wouldn't it, when he'll cry his eyes out over Sirius' grave. If there is even enough left of him to bury.

So he looks at Voldemort's fingers, at the ring, and asks: "Did that hurt?"

"Did what hurt?"

"Making the Horcrux."

Their eyes meet, and Sirius knows there's no coming back from this. He can see his death in those red-brown-mesmerising eyes that now shine with wrath and *fear*.

Sirius won't be able to like Voldemort if he's dead. Even if he somehow survives, surely he won't be attracted to Voldemort anymore if the man tortures him.

There, problem solved, he thinks to himself, just as Voldemort takes his wand out. Sirius doesn't even bother going for his own.

Chapter End Notes

Time to put the slow-burn behind us, I think.

In the books, I got the impression Karkaroff was arrested *before* Voldemort fell, but kept his mouth shut because he was afraid of his master, but as soon as he heard Voldemort was defeated, he was willing to speak all he knew to get away. That would explain why he didn't know which Death Eater was already dead or arrested.

If you want to talk to me on tumblr- https://www.tumblr.com/blog/metalomagnetic

Also, can you guess the two songs mentioned in the chapter?

Thank you for reading. Please, share your thoughts in the comments with me.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His head feels like it will split open. Sirius instinctively rubs his forehead, before he opens his eyes.

It would have hurt less if Sirius wouldn't have been a good Occlumens. He remembers Voldemort going straight into his head, tearing his way through, trying to find information about his stupid Horcrux.

Instead of doing the sensible thing and killing me already. Can't he see I'm fucking crazy?

Sirius resisted, mostly because he loves to be contrary, it's just his nature.

Alas, he couldn't resist for long. Voldemort wasn't giving up, so Sirius had to admit defeat, and he allowed all his thoughts and memories about the ring to come to the surface, so Voldemort could get what he desperately wanted to know.

And then Sirius fainted. *Embarrassing.*

Now he has a headache, and he's ...well, he's somewhere. A handful of candles burn low on the walls, and Sirius stands, gingerly.

At a first glance, the room looks as if no one could possibly use it. There's a grand, four-poster bed, a lonely nightstand, a fireplace and a modest dresser.

Nothing else; no pictures, no portraits, no books, no sign it's lived in. Not even a pitcher of water.

Sparse, cold and unappealing. It's Voldemort's room- Sirius knows it; he has no idea why he's so certain, but he is.

He tries to summon his wand, but his wand is not around. He waves his hand to light more candles, but he discovers the ones that are already lit are the only candles in the room.

Sirius focuses harder, hands outstretched, and the fireplace roars to life. A vast improvement. Sirius needs light to snoop around, after all.

Ignoring his head- which feels exactly as if someone has been ransacking through it- he opens the drawers built into the nightstand, only to find them empty; not a single speck of dust, but empty.

Now, Sirius can't be sure, but he has an inkling no house-elf is cleaning Voldemort's room. So Voldemort must do it himself. It makes Sirius laugh, and an image of Voldemort dressed in an apron, cleaning his room, takes shape in his head.

The dresser looks sad. There are a few robes, all black and interchangeable, and several pressed trousers and shirts. Now Sirius is assaulted by images of Voldemort washing, ironing and hanging his clothes.

Sirius has no idea how to do any of that; before Bella sent her house-elves to help him, Sirius paid one of his muggle neighbours to do it- that's why he mostly wore muggle clothing.

There's another drawer filled with socks and terribly boring black pants. Sirius resists the impulse to touch any of it.

He's not a creep, for Merlin's sake!

Step away from the dresser, Sirius.

Nothing else left to investigate, he goes through a door leading to the bathroom.

As spare as the bedroom.

How disappointing, he thinks, when he sees Voldemort uses a regular, nondescript toothbrush, nothing brooding or dangerous about it. His toothpaste is the boring type, too- the muggle type. Mint.

Wizards have their own toothpaste, but Sirius doesn't use them, either. Not since discovering the funny-shaped muggle tubes that squirt the product so neatly.

The jars on the side of the bathtub are magical, alright, but they are as dull as the rest of it—no scented salts or potions for Voldemort.

The bathtub itself is the only thing benefiting a dark lord from everything Sirius had seen so far.

It's enormous. And now there's an image in his head of Voldemort relaxing inside it, water lapping at his chest.

Sirius sights, sits on the edge of the tub and puts his head in his hands. Such a pity he's not dead. Now here he is, imaging Voldemort taking a bath.

This is so bad, he thinks. *What the fuck will I do?*

He's sure Voldemort didn't see anything else in his head- he was desperate for the Horcrux information. Eventually, Sirius offered it, before Voldemort could break his mind entirely, to the point of leaving Sirius insane.

Not that anyone would be able to tell the difference, really. I'm insane enough as it is.

But he didn't look for anything else, so at least he doesn't know about *this*- or maybe Voldemort knew before Sirius did.

You should be worried about sensitive information on the Order he could have uncovered. Like Arabella and Mundungus- instead, you're concerned about trivial nonsense.

“Oh, shut up!” Sirius snarls, standing. It’s not trivial. Anyone would be worried about lusting over the dark lord.

What does that say about me?

Sirius shakes his head. He needs to focus. He’s in a foreign place, without a wand. He needs to focus on that and not...other things.

He goes back to the bedroom; to his surprise, when he tries to open the other door, it works, and Sirius carefully advances into another room.

The curtains in the bedroom had been drawn, but here they are not. Sirius feels better when he sees the night sky.

He hurries to the window and looks outside. He’s not in Lestrange Manor, clearly. Well, he’d guessed that by the cheap furniture and the lack of skull decorations or hideous statues.

He’s somewhere in the country.

The window doesn’t open, so Sirius tilts his neck uncomfortably, bends and plasters his face on the glass, trying to get a more complete view of the stars.

Way north of London, he thinks.

He returns his attention to his surroundings. This room is...well, not livelier, but at least there is proof of inhabitance around.

Rows and rows of books line the walls, stacked upon each other in a way only magic could sustain. Sirius runs his fingers on them, and there’s no dust there, either.

There’s a grand desk- and this one looks expensive, probably a gift from Rodolphus or Lucius- with quills and ink-pots arranged neatly on it.

He tries to open the many drawers. They don’t open- they also curse Sirius.

“Fuck!” he hisses, quickly drawing his hand back. Nothing serious, more of a warning. “Ouch,” he mutters, blowing on his fingers, like an idiot, like they are actually burned, not just the illusion of it.

There’s a couch- a tiny couch, clearly not meant to entertain guests. It looks well maintained, but just *sad* compared to the luxury Sirius is used to.

The main door, which would lead outside, doesn’t open. But there’s another, and Sirius goes through it to find himself inside a kitchen.

He bursts out laughing. There’s nothing funny about it; it’s a standard kitchen- cabinets, counters, stove and a small table in the corner, clearly meant for one person because there’s a single chair tucked underneath it.

What’s funny is that Voldemort must *cook* there.

There's a pantry, too. Sirius feels the excellent cooling charms placed on it.

What does the dark lord eat?

Sirius only recognises some vegetables, a carton of eggs and some sort of meat. He's not exactly an expert in cooking or the ingredients used to do it.

He looks through the cabinets, hoping to find some alcohol, but he only finds tea.

He gets another glimpse outside the window in the kitchen, and he sees a building in the distance.

Did he take me there when he healed me after Diagon Alley? Is that where he brews and part-time tortures people?

Where is he, anyway?

Sirius paces around; now that he's had some sleep....what would happen if Voldemort kills Sirius?

Bella would lose her mind. Probably Regulus, too. What if they turn against Voldemort and he kills them-

No. Don't think of that. Voldemort is intelligent; if he offs Sirius, he will do it in a way that would take suspicion away from him, so Bella and the others would never learn of it.

Trying to take his mind off everything, he picks a random book and sits on the couch. He can't focus on the text, but Voldemort took notes, all around the margins, in neat, perfect calligraphy.

It's fascinating to see how Voldemort's mind works, what he has to add to the text, or what he finds wrong in the author's theories.

He picks more books, and it's the same with each one, filled with Voldemort's additions. At least the ones on magic- theories, charms, curses, practical applications, ancient runes.

There is no magical fiction in the house, Sirius discovers. None of their classics. He thinks it's just because Voldemort has no interest or time for fiction, but, to his shock, he discovers some muggle books, so famous even Sirius had heard of them, hidden away behind magical tomes on dark magic.

"I wouldn't recommend that one," Voldemort says when Sirius is bent low, extracting a muggle book from a tiny shelf, half obscured by larger ones.

Sirius loses his balance when he stands abruptly and knocks his head on a higher shelf.

He makes a mess as he regains his balance, arms flailing, trying to find purchase. Books fall all around him. One smacks him in the head. A thick one- a genealogy one.

“Fucking hells!” Sirius had not heard him Apparating inside. Not a noise, not that subtle feeling of magic that happens with Apparation.

He rubs at his chest with one hand, at his head with the other.

Voldemort walks to his desk, taking the seat behind it. He’s all collected, no trace of the fury and vulnerability he’d displayed in the seconds after Sirius brought the Horcrux up. The man probably took the time to have a meltdown someplace else while Sirius was unconscious.

The ring is still there, on his finger.

Sirius half expected Voldemort went to hide it at the bottom of the Atlantic or something.

He gestures with his chin that Sirius should sit, too.

“I’m not dying sitting,” Sirius says, eyes narrowed. “The indignity!”

“I’ll ask you to stand when the time comes,” Voldemort drawls. There’s no smile to indicate he’s joking.

Yet Sirius thinks it’s a joke, anyway.

He sits and pulls off his expensive watch. He places it on the desk. “Here; after I’m dead, use it to buy some comfortable chairs, will you?”

There it is- Sirius’ heart pumps faster when he sees the tiny pull of lips that threatens to expand in a smile but stops just short of it.

“No apology for picking through my head as if you were at the store?” Sirius asks.

“It wouldn’t have hurt if you hadn’t resisted.”

He’s even worse than Sirius at apologising.

“And you’re lucky that’s all I did to you.” He tilts his head. “You’re lucky I decided to check before killing you.”

Of course, he’d have seen Sirius figured the entire thing out quite a while ago, that he had no intentions of sharing that information with anyone.

“Wouldn’t have helped much if you killed me,” he offers. “I won’t tell anyone, but I hope now you realise I’m not the only one to figure it out. There must be others that picked up some questionable books in their life and deduced you have a Horcrux.” He shrugs. “You’d have to kill some of your favourite followers.”

Voldemort’s jaw ticks. “I didn’t consider the book was so.... accessible.”

Sirius makes a face. “Where did you find it?”

A pause. “At Hogwarts. In the restricted section.”

Sirius blinks at him. “So, you found that information in a *school* and thought it’s some great secret only you read about?”

Talk about arrogance.

“An oversight.”

“I’d say.”

“I haven’t seen it in Lestrange Manor or Malfoy-”

Sirius snorts. “Well, first of all, we don’t keep these sort of books on display because the Horcrux part is the least terrible thing in it- no one wants an impressionable child reading that crap. But I figure Lucius and Rodolphus hid theirs, so you won’t see them and lose it on them.” Sirius bends over the desk. “You do realise they know your name, too, right?”

Voldemort gets increasingly upset, eyes clouded, but it’s not directed at Sirius; more like at himself for being such an idiot about the entire thing.

It’s not his fault; he’s a half-blood raised in the muggle word. He’d have no idea that dark books are not that rare in certain families.

He was just a kid, Sirius thinks. He found the book at Hogwarts, with no father to warn him everything in it was a horrible idea. And then he went and ripped his soul apart. Probably also because he’s a half-blood; Voldemort didn’t grow up knowing there is no true death for the wizard kind, that they simply move on- or chose to stay behind as ghosts. For a young Tom Riddle, death must have seemed scary.

“You’ll tell Dumbledore about it,” Voldemort says, the muscle in his jaw growing tenser.

“He probably already guessed.” Partly the reason Sirius didn’t even think to blurt it out to Dumbledore. “You made sure to brag to everyone that you’re immortal...only one way to achieve that. And, as you know, Secrets of the Darkest Arts was in Hogwarts’s library, so...you know... all teachers were aware of it.”

“I realise that now.” He swallows. “He must have guessed, but he doesn’t know where or what the Horcrux is; you won’t tell him that part. You will tell him you think I have a Horcrux because of your observations about my cold skin and changed features. You will then take the memory out and give it to me. I want to see his reaction.” Voldemort leans over the desk, too. “And, Sirius- you will not bring it up with anyone else. I understand now that some people have knowledge of Horcruxes, more than I imagined, but that would still be a small number of people.”

“Yeah,” Sirius agrees. “I wouldn’t have read that shit if father didn’t make me. The entire book is distasteful, creepy, but also fucking boring. One needs determination to go through it.”

“And a superior intellect to understand it. Not many can boast of that.”

“True.” Sirius sighs. “You know I won’t tell anyone. You saw I had no intention of doing so.”

“Yes,” Voldemort says slowly, looking at Sirius as if he’s some great mystery. “I saw.”

It turns out attacking Sirius hadn’t made Voldemort less appealing. Then again, Sirius is used to liking people that abuse him. He loves his family, after all, so this isn’t such a surprise.

This will end badly.

“I’m disappointed,” he says, looking around slowly before returning his gaze to Voldemort. “There are no dungeons.”

“What would I do with a dungeon?”

“Where else would you keep the prisoners?”

Finally, a *smile*. “In the dungeons of Lestrange Manor; I certainly wouldn’t want someone whining and crying under my floor when I’m sleeping or reading.”

Yeah, I walked right into that one. Hoping it’s a joke, that there are no prisoners in Lestrange Manor, Sirius keeps talking.

“What about your lovers?”

You really shouldn’t.

Sirius can’t help himself, however. That’s always been his problem—very poor impulse control.

Voldemort doesn’t answer, just observes Sirius.

“You must be aware that’s what people are saying; since no one ever saw you with a *sweetheart*, they assume you keep ‘em locked up somewhere.”

He’s not even lying; there had been many weird speculations about Voldemort’s sex life. Not from sane people- but Sirius indeed wondered, even before he met Voldemort. Stupid drunk supposition, from funny to disturbed, thrown around with an equally drunk James or Marlene.

“Really?” Voldemort’s expression is one of mock surprise. “I thought the consensus was I was sleeping with Bellatrix.”

Yes, I walked right into this one as well.

“Ah, but that’s just in Death Eater circles,” Sirius says, because he can’t lose.

What are you losing? What are you hoping to win? What the fuck are you doing, Sirius?

“I wouldn’t lock a …lover in a dungeon.”

The way he says lover- there’s something about it, just- something Sirius can’t quite grasp.

“Huh,” Sirius leans back in his chair, meets Voldemort’s eyes and puts on his most winning smile. “I would. All those chains conveniently around….”

Voldemort holds his gaze.

They stare at each other for seconds that feel like an eternity.

Yeah, I’ve been flirting with him, teasing him, for months now.

Merlin, he had, hadn’t he? He just didn’t take it seriously because Sirius flirts with anyone- it’s his default way of communicating. Even with James, who is as close to being family without being family- he and Sirius often tease each other with no thought. Once more, it occurs to him that while this behaviour is usual for him, Voldemort has no way of knowing this.

Or does he? He must know. *He saw me with other people. He saw me kissing Bella full on the lips.*

Or that time, in a meeting, when Lucius asked Sirius why he was sitting at the other end of the table, and Sirius said ‘why, you want me to sit in your lap, instead?’.

Regardless of what happened in the past and how Voldemort interpreted it, this time, Sirius has no excuse. He’s fully aware he’s doing it; it’s with intent, and that’s no good.

Just no good.

It *feels* good, though.

“Chains?” Voldemort still holds his gaze. “What are we, muggles? We don’t need chains to restrain a prisoner.” A short pause. “Or a lover.”

It’s why sex with witches is better than sex with muggles. Sirius can use magic. They can use magic. It makes every little thing easier.

Picking up a muggle in a bar- just the travelling back to their place takes so long. Sirius is always in a hurry, he wants things *now*, and it’s frustrating having to wait.

With a witch- the bedroom is just an Apparition away.

And now, of course, his mind mixes Voldemort, sex, and magic together and-

He shifts in his seat, looks away.

Behave, he begs his cock.

When will he learn that trying to make Voldemort uncomfortable only leaves Sirius uncomfortable? Any joke, any snide remark Sirius makes, Voldemort can escalate it to something more.

He always calls Sirius’ bluff. And he wins-

I won, too. I found out his name. His Horcrux.

Sirius coughs. “It’s not what I’d imagined it would look,” he says. “Your lair.”

“You spent time thinking about my house?”

Sirius shrugs. “I imagined you retreat into a void when you’re not out there terrorising people.”

Another smile; a slow shake of his head, as if he finds Sirius’ thoughts outrageous.

Looking away from him, Sirius’ eyes fall on the shelves behind the desk and-Sirius expected something impressive to be there. A human skull, an ancient book, something.

He sees a gramophone.

Which, in its way, impresses Sirius more than a dark, rare artefact.

He stands, moves around the desk until he’s by the shelves. Voldemort shifts in his chair, turns his head to keep Sirius in his line of sight.

There are records, too.

Some, he owns himself. Others he doesn’t recognise. Old stuff, from the ’40s, but not the kind of music his parents were fond of. They’re all muggle.

“Now, what will we do when you and your righteous cause erase all the muggles from the world? Who will produce good music?” He straightens his back and looks down at Voldemort, who is still seated.

“I hear you’re good with a piano and a violin. Or at least Bella said so. You could entertain me when the muggles and their music perish.”

Sirius huffs. “My mum made me play when I was young. I prefer the guitar now. And the drums, though I didn’t get the hang of them just yet. Busy with the war, you know.”

Voldemort stands, coming closer. Sirius hastily grabs some records, holds them to his chest, as if they’re an armour, just to have something between them.

“I didn’t imagine you listen to music,” he says.

A raised eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Sirius’ mouth is dry. He licks his lips. “I don’t know,” he says, with a shrug. “The void stuff-there’s no music in the void.”

Voldemort is not supposed to have a home or hobbies. He’s not supposed to have a fully equipped kitchen. He’s not supposed to like Sirius. He should only be the borderline mythical terror that has Britain in a civil war and not allowed to exist outside of that.

Sirius was told Voldemort was a ruthless monster, and while he is monstrous and he is ruthless, now Sirius knows he has a modest house where he lives and reads, with a gramophone and-

“Do you cook?” he blurts out.

“Are you inviting yourself to dinner?” Voldemort answers, and he’s even closer now.

Sirius clutches to the records for dear life.

He’s too uncomfortable, so he falls back on being a prick.

“No, I’m only used to house-elves serving me food.”

Voldemort doesn’t curse him, he doesn’t smile, he doesn’t sneer, he doesn’t answer. He just stands there, too close, eyes searching Sirius’ face-

Sirius slams the records into Voldemort’s chest, forcing him to take them, and then quickly walks past him, puts some distance between them.

“Right, so Dumbledore- You want me to go now or when? I’ve a headache-thanks to *someone*- so whatever you want, I’d rather do it as soon as possible so I can go to sleep.”

Voldemort puts the records back, then retrieves a vial from a drawer. “This should relieve you.”

“No, thanks,” Sirius barks. “I’m used to headaches by now. Ever since I met you, there’s one to greet me every morning.”

Voldemort checks his watch. “Go now. He should be sleeping, if you wake him up and spring it on him there’s a chance he’d be more open with his reactions.”

“Fine,” Sirius agrees, readily, heading to the door, incredibly anxious to get out of that room and away from Voldemort.

He needs to be away, his skin prickling with unease.

“Sirius.”

“What?” he snarls, turning his head.

“Your wand. Unless you plan to Apparate without it.”

“Right. Well, I bet I could, you know. I’m a remarkable wizard,” he says, rambling.

“You are,” Voldemort answers, far too serious and honest.

Morgana’s tits, I need to get out of here.

He marches back to Voldemort and snatches his wand from between those long, elegant fingers-

Leave!

He's at the door again in no time-

"Sirius."

Sirius makes a frustrated sound, hand on the doorknob.

"Yes?"

"Return here when you are done. I want the memory fresh."

"Fine."

He can't think of having to return. He just needs some air first and then he'll worry about anything else.

"You won't be able to Apparate inside-"

"I saw the runes painted on the wall behind the bookshelves," Sirius snaps at him. "I'll Apparate outside, by the torture barn."

"By the- *what*?"

Sirius gets out before Voldemort can stop him again.

(-)

He hyperventilates outside Hogsmeade, sitting against a tree, head between his knees.

"Holy mother of- fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!*"

He thought he'd feel better out of Voldemort's presence, but he doesn't. His skin is still itching.

His head hurts.

And now he has to go and stand under Dumbledore's scrutiny.

Granted, that's far less terrifying of a prospect than standing under Voldemort's.

Far less appealing, too.

Stop. Get yourself together.

Yes, Sirius, a displeased voice rings in his head. Sounds like his father's. *Go on, do your job. Jump from one half-blood to another, doing their bidding, playing their games-*

“Father, shut up! I’m not in the mood, alright?”

He tenses when he says that, because he’d never told his father to shut up before. He half expects to be cursed into oblivion for a second, before he remembers his father is dead and he’s not talking to Sirius.

He shakes his head and stands.

(-)

Dumbledore’s expression is priceless- he looks almost as scared as Voldemort did when the word ‘Horcrux’ is out of Sirius’ mouth.

The most laughable part is that Dumbledore doesn’t look panicked about the possibility of Voldemort having a Horcrux but that Sirius knows about it.

“You knew he had one,” Sirius observes calmly.

“I suspected.”

“Then why are you shocked I suspect it?” Sirius demands, tired of these two old arrogant fools that think they are so above the rest, that they know things no one else can possibly know.

Idiots, the both of them.

“It is not common knowledge,” Dumbledore says slowly, eyeing Sirius with apprehension.

“Maybe not in your circles.” Sirius shrugs. “My father had me read Secrets of the Darkest Arts when I was fifteen.”

“To give that to a child,” Dumbledore says, horror clinging to his words.

That’s a mistake- it is an attack on Sirius’ father, on his parenting, and it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand out in anger.

“It is wise to give that to a boy, actually,” he spits out. “To put that information out there in the open and explain it’s a terrible idea, a road only a *coward-*” Sirius adds that part just for Voldemort to see it later “- afraid of death would take. It’s far better than hiding it until it becomes mysterious and fascinating instead of something stupid.”

Of course, telling Dumbledore things shouldn’t be kept secret is about as useful as saying it to Voldemort.

Gods, why can’t we shut these two in a room and let the best man win? Well, maybe not the best, but the most powerful.

We could sell tickets for exorbitant amounts of gold, and then we can use that to rebuild our world.

Rosmerta would make a fortune selling butterbeer to the spectators.

"Since you know," Dumbledore says, and Sirius is pulled back into reality, away from his stupid thoughts. "You should pay attention, get a hint of what it could be."

Sirius snorts. "You're joking, right? If I were to be dumb enough to make a Horcrux-" another jab at Voldemort, who'll hear and see all this shortly. "Then I'd turn it into a pebble and throw it in Sahara' sands."

Dumbledore watches him closely. "That's the logical choice—the prudent one. But a logical, prudent man doesn't rip his soul apart. Voldemort is too proud to preserve a piece of his soul in something insignificant."

I'll be damned, Dumbledore does know some things about Voldemort; it's not just empty bragging.

"Maybe if I'd know *who* he is, it would be easier to investigate," Sirius suggests, baiting for a reaction. Giving Dumbledore a chance to show he trusts Sirius, that he isn't sending Sirius on a suicide mission without even trusting him.

Dumbledore still hesitates. After all this time, after Sirius is out there risking his neck and bringing back crucial information, the man still doesn't want to tell him Voldemort's name.

He opens his mouth- seems to reconsider, then opens it again.

Sirius grows bored. "Why does it have to be such a *riddle*?" he asks with a smirk.

Dumbledore gets it. He looks even more surprised. "How did you learn that?"

"Gods be good, you're both delusional. He went to school with my parents, aunts and uncles. Like a couple of decades ago, not two centuries ago."

He pretends to be upset - or more upset than he actually is that Dumbledore doesn't trust Sirius- so he can cut the meeting short before Dumbledore decides to talk about something Voldemort shouldn't know.

I just need to hold on for a little longer, and then I can go home, Sirius tells himself, when he Apparates besides the barn and walks the short distance to Voldemort's house.

Fuck, he has a house. And he brought me inside it.

Before he can knock, the doors open. Sirius straightens his back, exhales, and goes inside.

(-)

They sit at the desk, a Pensieve between them. Voldemort hands him a vial, and Sirius extracts the memory before handing it over.

Voldemort checks the vial for what feels like a long time, presumably to detect if it's been tampered with.

Like Sirius would have the skill or the patience to temper a memory enough to fool Voldemort.

Maybe he finally stopped underestimating me.

When he's satisfied the memory is real, he pours it into the Pensieve, but he doesn't dive inside it, makes it play out on the Pensieve's surface.

He stares at Dumbledore's face without blinking, doesn't react to Sirius' jabs at him at all, and replays the memory three times.

Sirius spends the time amusing himself with how his voice sounds when he doesn't hear it inside his head.

Damn, I sound hot, he thinks, smug. *I should buy one of those muggle record thingies and try to sing.* He also sounds a bit like Malfoy, and that makes him wince; he hates Lucius' pretentious drawl, and he hadn't realised he can be just as bad, even when he doesn't do it on purpose.

Finally, Voldemort puts the Pensieve away- Sirius is sure he'll be going through that memory many more times in the future- and starts pacing around the room, seemingly lost in thought.

"Why didn't you use a pebble or something equally unimportant?" Sirius asks, because he's apparently incapable of shutting up.

"It's an awful idea to have it so unremarkable. Easily lost."

"What would you need to find it for?"

Voldemort looks at him like he's stupid. "To make sure it's still there, that no one destroyed it."

"Ah."

Yes, he supposes Voldemort has a point. Or-

"Wait. I think you'd feel it, right? If it were to be destroyed? Surely you don't need to see it, just- feel it."

Voldemort shrugs. "I don't know."

Merlin's beard, it's your fucking soul, how can you just shrug it off?

“Still,” Sirius argues. “Shouldn’t you hide it somewhere safe?”

“Who is going to take it from my finger?”

“Well, see, if you understand no one can possibly defeat you in combat and take the ring, that makes the Horcrux … unnecessary.”

“Does it? Why? One can only die in a duel?” Voldemort mocks him. “I can fight anyone off, Sirius. But I can’t fight the passage of time or old age or natural death. *Natural*,” he sneers. “As if there’s anything natural about dying.”

Sirius refrains from pointing out death is one of the most natural things about life. Clearly, Voldemort does not think so.

“If I had one, I’d hide it in my house,” Sirius muses. “Or in my- the Black vault. No one can get inside either.”

Voldemort gives him a look. “I don’t have impenetrable houses or vaults in the depths of Gringotts.”

And you never will. Voldemort can win the fucking war, he can take over, proclaim himself a God of magic if he wants, but he’ll never have an ancestral house like Grimmauld or Malfoy Manor. He can take one from his followers, but it will never be *his*, the blood and magic of generations before him will never accept him as an owner. Same for Gringotts. If he wins, sure, he could open a vault. On the ground floor, maybe. But it would take him thousands of years to get to the important ones, in the underbelly— to accumulate not only gold, but family artefacts and heirlooms gathered through centuries or a millennium.

For a second, Sirius feels a stab of pity for him. No matter what he will do, he will never be like the purebloods that bow to him.

Don’t you see you are special exactly because you are not like us?

He’s sure Voldemort sees it- perhaps he doesn’t even want a vault in Gringotts or a huge manor. But he must resent everyone who has one. Maybe when he wins, he won’t try to fit in, but he’ll try to make sure no one else has a vault in Gringotts or a manor or-

That’s an uncomfortable thought to entertain. Once more he realises that Voldemort is much more of a threat to purebloods than Dumbledore ever hoped to be. That’s why the old folks, like Parkinson, want nothing to do with him.

Voldemort returns to his pacing, deep in thought. He looks restless, like he never did before.

But it’s an interesting type of restless. He isn’t afraid anymore. He’s gotten over the shock that his great secret wasn’t that much of a secret. He looks excited, instead.

“You did me a favour,” he says, at last, stopping by Sirius’ chair, looking down at him. “Now I know Dumbledore is aware I have a Horcrux.”

“You’re welcome,” Sirius says, bitterly.

Now he really can't be killed, can he?

Only- no. No. It's not Sirius' fault. The man couldn't have been killed before, either. Forget the Horcrux, he's just unbeatable.

And Dumbledore knew, anyway- *'Voldemort is not the type of foe to defeat in battle,'* he'd told Sirius long before.

They can still 'kill him', even with a Horcrux. If he gets hit by a killing curse or a decapitation spell, his body would still die, wouldn't it? And then he's basically gone, anyway. Who's going to take orders from a ghost-

"Wait," Sirius asks, frowning. "What if you die- I mean, whatever death is for you? You'd need someone to know you're not completely dead… you'd need someone to resurrect you. You need someone to understand you have a Horcrux."

"Yes."

Sirius blinks. "So… oh, gods! You did tell someone. You told Bella!"

A soft smile. "She'll know what to do, in case there is a need for it."

So the trusts go both ways with her. She's not delusional when she calls herself Voldemort's most trusted.

He grabs Sirius' shoulder, looming over his chair. "That doesn't mean you are to talk to her about it. You will never speak to anyone else about the subject, no matter if you think they are already aware."

"I won't," Sirius spits.

"And, just so you know, Bella seemed sufficiently impressed about it. As if she had never heard about Horcruxes before. She's a dark witch, raised in your family and she didn't-"

Sirius laughs. "You're joking, right? You could change colours on a leaf and Bella would look at you like you're the only one able to do it."

Poor Voldemort. If he'd told Rodolphus, instead, Rodolphus' reaction would have tipped Voldemort off that knowledge about Horcruxes isn't that uncommon. But he told Bella, who must have looked awe-struck, but then she looks awe-struck just when Voldemort breathes.

"Why not Rodolphus?"

"He's the face of the war. Everyone knows he's a Death Eater. He leads all the important missions," Voldemort explains. "He's far more likely to get arrested and interrogated-he is trained to resist every attempt at Legilimency or Veritaserum, but still- he's far more likely to end up in Azkaban. Or die. He's at risk. She isn't so exposed. If something happens to me, everyone will come after Rodolphus, not her."

Sirius bites his lip. “I told Dumbledore that I have concerns about Rodolphus having Bella under the Imperius or that he might blackmail her with Cissa’s safety. I said she would never bow down to you- and he remembers how unreceptive she is to male authority. He said if the worst comes to pass, he’d speak for her.”

A smile. “You’re making plans, aren’t you? In case I lose? That’s not very reassuring, Sirius.”

“Well, excuse me for not being blinded like the rest of the Death Eaters. I won’t let Bella’s and Regulus’ fates rest on blind faith in you. You are only human at the end of the day.” Sirius says it mostly to remind himself that Voldemort is human, that he lives in a house, not a void, that he’s just a man. “Anything could happen. I want my family safe.”

Voldemort tilts his head, examines Sirius. “As it is, I want Bella safe, too. So I appreciate your efforts. Let us hope that if anything were to happen, she’ll find it in herself to repudiate me publicly. I told her she must, but…I have doubts she’d be able to speak badly of me.”

Sirius fears the same. He fears that even if Dumbledore would speak up for her, she’ll just stand up and lick her mark, spit at Dumbledore’s feet and declare her undying loyalty for Voldemort.

“Knowing Bella, knowing she might get in trouble in case I wasn’t here to protect her- I…”

Sirius looks at him, eyebrow raised. Not often for him to stumble.

“I left hints for Lucius to figure it out.”

That’s a surprise.

“I think he knows already,” Sirius says, slowly. “I don’t know what hint you gave him, but saying you’re immortal is all the hint some of us would need. So…yeah.” And then, more carefully, he adds: ” Lucius is- well.” Sirius considers his words. “I like Lucius. He’s suave, he’s smart and sneaky and, trust me, if there’s someone that knows how to get out of trouble, that’s him.”

“Yes. Unlike Bella or Rodolphus, Lucius would have no issues renouncing me.”

Indeed, Lucius is in the Wizengamot repudiating ‘these terrorists and the lunatic that orders them around.’

“That’s why I left the hint with him.”

It makes more sense now, why Bella and Lucius are so protected, why Lucius doesn’t go on raids, why he’s allowed to bad-mouth Voldemort everywhere. Voldemort wants them safe, needs to know they’d have time to resurrect him, in case he falls. The Aurors wouldn’t look at them, at least not right away.

“Yes. But- I mean, in case you half-die or whatever and it’s left to him to find you- Lucius follows strength. He wouldn’t risk his neck for someone that is… somewhat dead.”

Voldemort knows this, too. Sirius can see it in his eyes.

What a tough position. Having full trust in Bella's loyalty and knowing she would help him, but not trusting she'll keep it together enough to actually do it. Never mind the stupid Aurors- if something were to happen to Voldemort, she'd probably lose her mind entirely.

And then having Lucius as a second choice, who would definitely keep his composure, but whose loyalty to Voldemort is *conditional*.

Voldemort fingers travel from his shoulder to Sirius' jaw, holding it lightly.

"Now you know," he says. "And you have Bella's best qualities but Lucius' cunning when you put your mind to it."

Sirius swallows.

"I'll teach you a resurrection ritual."

Sirius' heart beats wildly, more concerned with the fingers on his jaw than with the words.

"Do you really trust I'd do it?" he asks, and his voice comes softer than he intended.

"You'll have no choice." He smiles. "Did you see the look in Dumbledore's eyes tonight?"

Sirius swallows again.

"The second I went into your head and saw how easily you concluded I have a Horcrux, I knew Dumbledore would have reached the same conclusion. I didn't need to see Dumbledore's reaction to having confirmation. I wanted to see his reaction when he became aware *you* know so much dark magic, that at twenty years old you correctly and efficiently recognised the signs of someone having split their soul." Voldemort tilts his head. "He always knew you are unpredictable, that you can easily slip to the other side. He never truly trusted you, and after today? He never will. For Dumbledore, just knowing such dark magic is enough to be condemned. And how casual you were about it- oh, Sirius, that told Dumbledore all he needed to know. He sent you to me, trusting your stubborn nature and your affection for your friends will shield you from my influence. But he made a mistake. Dumbledore failed to predict I would take such interest in you." He bends closer, fingers still soft on Sirius' jaw. "He didn't think I'd care enough to offer you what he cannot. The only thing that keeps you half-way on his side-"

"I'm not half-way on his side," Sirius tries to lie.

"*Shh,*" Voldemort hisses. "Dumbledore can't protect your friends. He has to protect a country from me; he's spread thin. Order members are dying all around him. Even if he'd do his best, he can't protect Potter in battle, when he's not even there, can he?"

Sirius opens his mouth.

"I, however, can make sure your friends will live through this. If I order it, no curse will head their way on the battlefield. They'll never be targeted. The way Andromeda and her mudblood aren't."

Sirius stares right into his eyes. This close, the brown shines through the red.

“Ted and Andy aren’t fighting you. James, Lily, Peter and Remus though-“

Voldemort laughs. He throws his head back and *laughs*, a deep, amused sound.

“*Fighting* me,” he mocks. “They are nothing more than annoying little flies. I can swat them so easily, and Dumbledore wouldn’t be able to stop me. But if you ask it… well, then I can let them fly around uselessly and ignore them.”

His fingers move, advance to the back of Sirius’ jaw, curl around his neck.

“After tonight, Dumbledore will think you a lost cause. You know too much; too much dark magic, too much about me. If I were to fall tomorrow, Dumbledore wouldn’t stand up for you when Aurors will descend over anyone that wears a mark.”

You sneaky bastard, Sirius thinks. *That’s why you wanted me to tell him about the Horcrux.*

A part of him doesn’t want to think of Dumbledore that poorly. He wants to think Dumbledore would stand up for him.

The other part…

I can’t let him manipulate me. Dumbledore wouldn’t just abandon me-

He did look horrified when you almost killed Snape. When you spoke of Horcruxes so casually.

He discards the thoughts.

“And Marlene?” Sirius asks, boldly. “Would she be protected?”

Voldemort lets go of Sirius, steps back. “The McKinnons are far more dangerous than the Potters. One is an Auror. The entire family is against me, and they are quite a large family. The girl- she isn’t Potter, is she? She killed two of my Death Eaters.”

“I killed one, too,” Sirius reminds him. Sirius’ first kill.

Voldemort sits back behind the desk, eyes going over Sirius’ face. “If you stop her from fighting, if you abandon Dumbledore *completely* and see him for what he is, then Marlene McKinnon and your four friends will survive this war.”

Sirius shivers. This sounds much safer than Dumbledore’s speeches of ‘good shall prevail’; then his talks about ‘sacrifices have to be made, lives will be lost, but we will win in the end, as long as we never give up.’

Sirius believes Voldemort. He doesn’t want to, but he believes him. Dumbledore doesn’t have the power to keep Sirius friends alive, and he wouldn’t have the interest to save Sirius’ family.

Voldemort has that power.

(-)

Rodolphus worries were unfounded, it seems. He appeared concerned Voldemort is charmed by Sirius' face to the point that he might have lost sight that Sirius has not proved his loyalty to him without a doubt.

But Voldemort didn't lose sight of that. He seemed perfectly aware Sirius is 'half-way' on Dumbledore's side.

Am I just half-way?

Sirius drinks alone in his sitting room, sprawled on the couch, waiting for Marlene to come home from St Mungo's.

I could save them all. I could save her.

Don't think like that, another part of him argues.

Voldemort must be stopped. He's causing so much destruction, so much death and suffering- and not only to muggleborns and Ministry workers. He's destroying the Sacred Families as well.

But do you really care about that, as long as you and yours are safe?

Sirius sighs, throws a hand over his eyes.

How safe can they be? How will Lily ever live comfortably in a world ruled by Voldemort?

And how is he supposed to get Marlene to stop fighting, anyway? Just impossible.

He puts it out of his mind. He tries to forget about Voldemort's promise that Dumbledore thinks Sirius a lost cause.

I can't let him get to me.

(-)

The dream shifts, abruptly.

Sirius is pulled out of a battle, bloody and loud, and he's back in Grimmauld.

The fear quiets down, washed away by peace.

Safety.

I am home, Sirius thinks, the comfort of it surrounding him like a warm blanket. *Nothing can hurt me here.*

A door opens, and Sirius expects his father to walk through it-

He open his eyes to find himself in his sitting room. The disappointment is crushing, the loss of his father devastating him anew.

"My father was a drunk," a voice says and Sirius jumps from the couch, wand already aimed in the direction he heard the noise from-

His grandfather is standing by the window, hands clasped at his back, looking out into the night.

"Few were aware of it, however. Highly functional alcoholic. Your mother named you after him just to spite me. I told Orion he shouldn't have allowed it."

Sirius blinks. When his grandfather doesn't disappear, he pinches himself.

What the fuck? Did I dream him into existence?

Did I want a piece of father so badly I conjured him?

"Did you come to kill me?" Sirius asks. He meant to be sarcastic, but instead-

He's whispering, like a kid in the dark that is afraid of monsters under his bed.

An inelegant noise comes from his grandfather. Why, if anyone else made it, Sirius would say it was a snort.

"Don't be ridiculous."

That's rich. Last Sirius saw him, his grandfather came to speak with him at the Potter's house, a week after he ran away.

Naively, for a second, Sirius actually believed he was there to take him back home.

In reality, he came to threaten Sirius.

"If you procreate with an undesirable woman, if you attempt to give my noble name to an abomination, I will kill the babe in its mother's womb."

"Will you kill me, too?" Sirius asks, hurt and angry, trying to sound unconcerned, mocking, but failing miserably.

"No. I don't have the heart to hurt you. But I will not live forever. Cygnus won't hesitate."

“How did you get in?” Sirius lowers his wand, still half believing he’s dreaming.

“You use blood wards, like we taught you. I am your blood.”

Even special, secret, powerful wards are not meant to hide Sirius from family.

With one last look at the stars, his grandfather turns and advances toward Sirius.

He’s ageing well, doesn’t look at all different from last they saw each other. Sirius waves a hand and the candles come to life all around them.

A tall man, with a straight back and proud shoulders, clad in the finest of robes.

Sirius, however, is shirtless.

He’s really here.

He is there, and he’s looking at Sirius, at his many tattoos. His face remains blank until he finds the Dark Mark.

An expression of pure distaste shines over features very alike Sirius’, before it melts back into nothing.

“I will give you a moment to make yourself presentable,” he says, as he sits in one of Sirius’ armchairs.

“This is my house,” Sirius snarls, the confusion, joy, tenderness he just felt wrapping into anger, fast. “You don’t get to come here and-”

How dare he, just stroll in, uninvited, in the middle of the night, wake Sirius up and then-

Sirius takes a deep breath. Not worth fighting over. Useless, too. His grandfather isn’t his mother or Bellatrix or Cygnus.

The man doesn’t fight. He just stares in silence.

Sirius meets his gaze.

“Excuse me,” he growls.

He spots his T-shirt laying on the floor, but it is a muggle T-shirt, and if it were his mother, or any other relatives of his, he’d put it on, but now he can’t even consider it.

He could summon a robe, but he needs a moment to collect himself, to get ready for whatever brought his grandfather-

Something bad must have happened.

“Is mum alright?” Sirius asks, forgetting anything else, his blood turning to ice in his veins.

“Everyone is alive. There is nothing urgent. Go.”

Able to breathe again, Sirius heads to the stairs.

Once out of his grandfather's sight, he runs to his room.

His hands are shaking.

Sirius goes to the bathroom, washes his face with freezing water, glowers at his hands until they stop trembling.

He picks one of the most expensive robe Bella stuffed in his dresser, and he hastily brushes his hair, tying it back.

Why are you going through all this trouble?

Sirius shouldn't care what his grandfather thinks of him. He should kick the old man out, slam the door after him.

"Would be a tad odd to do it now," he mutters to himself. "I should have done it as soon as I saw him. Now it's just pathetic."

"So is talking to yourself," the mirror says sleepily.

He shakes his head and, with a last deep breath, he leaves the room.

(-)

His grandfather served himself to a glass of wine.

He poured Sirius some scotch.

This is on purpose. He's establishing authority over Sirius, in his own house. He wants to manipulate the conversation, and he needs to have any advantage he can get for that to happen.

There is a reason he came in the middle of the night, and he didn't just visit like a normal person.

He broke in, woke Sirius up, ordered him to get dressed, and now he's sitting royally in Sirius' favourite armchair, serving Sirius with his own alcohol.

Well, Rodolphus', but still.

Sirius sits in the other armchair.

I will not talk first.

He wonders if it was the man in front of him that taught Sirius' father that lesson.

He's old, I can take him, Sirius assures himself.

His grandfather smiles after a few tense minutes. Not even a smile, just the slightest turn of lip. It still conveys his amusement, tells Sirius he's very aware of everything he's thinking of.

"You were always a stubborn boy," he says, clasping his hands on one of his knees. "Wilful, spiteful and so destructive. I kept telling Orion he should beat that rebellion out of you, but he didn't listen. He wouldn't even allow me to discipline you."

Sirius remembers it well. The last time his grandfather took a belt to him, Sirius' father threatened to rip his hand away if he ever touches his sons again.

"Out of control, impudent, loud. Impatient and selfish."

The words fly past Sirius; he's well used to them, years and years of having to hear them from his mother and a number of relatives.

"But strong." He leans forward, eyes sparkling. "No one would call you weak. Your mother lost child after child, did you know that?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "We gave up hope it will ever happen. And then you came. She almost lost you several times. They put her on bed rest, early on. High risk, the Healer said. And by Merlin, telling Walburga to stay still- but she did not move from that bed for close to half a year."

"I don't see what that has to do with anyth-"

"Orion didn't want to allow himself hope. His heart hardened over so many losses. He distanced himself from the family, always at work. He didn't go up to see your mother. He pretended it wasn't happening. We were all sure you'd die, like all your siblings before you. But Walburga was certain you will live. She named you Sirius when her belly was still flat. You were a very wanted child. We waited long for you, boy. The future of our family."

"Grandfather-"

"I had to watch my son die, and then I had to watch you turn your back on our family. I had to read newspapers detailing your latest affair or drunken escapade. Worse, I had to hear rumours you were Dumbledore's dog. That you were out there fighting, spilling your blood- *my* blood- for mudbloods."

Sirius lowers his eyes.

I'm doing what is right. Muggleborns are magical. It is a noble thing to stand up for those that are in need.

And yet, he doesn't feel very noble. He feels like a disappointment.

Like a *traitor*.

"I confess, I was done with you. I wrote you off as dead and tried to accept our family now relied on Regulus to continue it."

“He’s a good boy,” Sirius says, always bothered when it is implied his brother is not sufficient.

Remember when you yelled at him he’ll never suffice as Heir Apparent?

Sirius does his best to forget it.

“A good man,” he corrects himself.

His grandfather watches him closely.

“He is. He is smart and powerful. Loyal. An asset to our family. He’d have been enough, we’d have called ourselves lucky to have him, if only we hadn’t had you to compare him with. Your father succeeded in teaching Regulus what you always rejected. He taught your brother how to obey. Regulus does what he is told, unflinchingly. He serves our House well. The problem is, servitude, once ingrained, does not stop at family.”

Sirius stiffens.

“I know what’s on his left arm. I’ve seen the articles he glued to his walls in his room. You can hear the adoration in his voice when he speaks of the dark lord.”

Another displeased expression, and this time it is there to stay on his grandfather’s face.

“The *dark lord*.” The contempt in his voice is obvious. “He went after our young, when he couldn’t impress his peers. When he couldn’t get the attention of his elders. His *betters*. But now he’s holding us all hostage with our sons and grandsons.”

“I know,” Sirius whispers.

“I refused to speak your name, to think of you. But as more and more young fools flocked to his side, I found myself thinking- ‘Sirius would have never. Sirius would not bow. He wouldn’t be impressed. He wouldn’t talk of him like he’s Merlin’s second coming, the way his cousin and brother do. He wouldn’t fall for it.’”

“Grandfather-”

“I *buried* you, too. Along with my son.” And now emotion coloured his tone. Rage, yes.

But there’s something underneath it, something that makes his voice deeper-

There’s pain under the rage.

“I gave up on you and I would have never called you a grandson again. But then I hear -I hear the impossible. That you are back in our circles. You’re welcomed at Malfoy Manor. Bella, who would cry or go into a fit of rage when she’d hear your name, now has that soft look about her when someone mentions you. You took your place in the Wizengamot, but you are blocking it. I knew what that meant. I knew what you’ve done when Lestrange stopped cursing your name. And yet- I could not believe it. It went against everything I knew of you. So I dug you up from the grave I’ve put you in and I had to see- I had to *know*. So I came

here. And I found our ancient wards, perfectly executed." He straightens his shoulders even more than they already are. "You are one of us. You never forgot it. And I can't either. Not anymore. Why did you join him? Was it to protect your brother? Bellatrix?"

"Perhaps it is because all your lessons stayed with me. Perhaps it's because I want muggleborns dead," Sirius hisses, in an attempt to hide his discomfort.

A raised eyebrow. "No one taught you to want them dead. No one taught you to kill them. Just to keep them at bay. Why did you take that awful mark? I know you can't possibly be fooled by him. Not you. *Never*. Are you spying? Did Dumbledore put you up to it?"

This is getting dangerous. "It's not your concern what I do with my life. You have Regulus. Focus on him. And you do have him. I can promise you that. Regulus will not be… involved in whatever is coming."

A satisfied smile. "So you took the seat to make sure Regulus will be useless to Voldemort."

Sirius doesn't answer, but he doesn't need to.

"That is why I came, Sirius. You're mingling with Dumbledore or with Voldemort or who knows what other self-righteous half-bloods. You're there, you're lowering yourself in their company, but your loyalty is with your family. You might have run away from your home, but one cannot outrun the blood in one veins."

"I ran away," Sirius says, standing up. "But it was not me that threatened death on any Black. I left, but I would allow no one to hurt any of you."

His grandfather has the nerve to smile.

"You, however, were so ready to forget me. Mum stood there and said I am not her son. You told me I was not your grandson anymore. And if it weren't for this-" he points to his Dark Mark- " Bella wouldn't have ever talked to me again. You wouldn't be here. You wouldn't hand me a glass of water if I was on fire."

"Spare me." His grandfather rolls his eyes and Sirius advances towards him, looms over his armchair. "How was I supposed to know you are still loyal to blood when you left so easily? But now I know, so here I am-"

"*Easily*?" Sirius' voice is chocked with emotion, with unspilled tears. "You think it was easy? It was the hardest thing I've ever done. The only thing harder would have been to stay."

"Who's fault is that, Sirius?" His grandfather looks up, but he doesn't stand. He doesn't need to.

Sirius could be eight feet tall and he wouldn't be able to intimidate the proud man sitting in front of him.

"Do you think it was easy for me to step inside Grimmauld where the body of my son was still breathing, but he was gone?"

“I was sixteen for the love of-”

“I didn’t want you to go through that. Orion didn’t want it. He wanted *dignity*. But your mother wouldn’t let me. And I would have just rolled over her, but you- you picked her side. You didn’t let me do what had to be done.”

“You’re fucking crazy!” Sirius yells at him. “How did you expect me to just let you kill him? How?”

“It is done. We cannot change it. You were young.”

It isn’t done. It stays with Sirius. All those memories are there in his head, revisited every night he’s not blacked out drunk.

His grandfather trying to enter the master bedroom where Sirius’ father laid, to ‘end it’. His grandfather, yelling at Sirius and his mother, telling them that while Orion lived, but lacked his faculties, the Black family was in limbo, was in danger, because no one could take proper control of their house, their vaults, their seat in the Wizengamot.

“What matters now is the future.”

“There is no future,” Sirius says, all empty, rage gone, replaced with the memories of those terrible, horrific days.

He collapses on the couch.

“Don’t be fatalistic.”

It’s Sirius’ turn to snort.

“You don’t know Voldemort-”

“Of course I know him. I kicked him out of my office when he was your age. But when he returned and stole our children, when he came back draped in dark magic, I could hardly kick him out of any place.” He sneers. “I never thought I’d agree with anything the Ministry does, but when they finally moved themselves to issue the arrest warrant, I was happy. It meant he could finally stop showing up at events hosted by the Sacred Families. But oh, before that, there were years when I had to suffer him. That smirk of his, the insults he no doubt find very witty. I know him, boy.”

“You’ve seen a mask. You haven’t seen *him*.”

“I saw a coward, so ashamed of his name, he erased it from history.”

“Not very well,” Sirius mutters.

“He is a delusional man. He’s not all there. He convinced himself people don’t remember him.”

Sirius doesn’t know how true that statement is.

Voldemort seems very aware Sirius' mum knows who he is.

He made all of you stop saying his name, though. You're all scared of him. Sirius knows better than to accuse a Black of being afraid, however, so he keeps his thoughts to himself.

"He's ridiculously skilled with magic, from what my sources tell me. It's clear to the naked eye, anyway. But power? Sirius…raw power means little with nothing of substance to back it up. He is just one man. One convincing man, I'll give him that. But he'd be nothing without his followers, without their names and their fortunes-"

"What do you want?" Sirius asks, exhausted. Nothing can tire him more than family.

"When this war will be over, no matter who wins, we need to be on the right side of things."

"How selfless," Sirius drawls, doing his best Lucius impression.

His grandfather looks unbothered. "I can't stop the war. We tried; what's left of us old men tried to smother it before it began, but our own sons and grandsons betrayed us."

"No," Sirius hisses. "No. They obeyed you! How can you not see that? Since we are born, you taught us that mudblo-muggleborns," Sirius corrects himself. "That muggleborns are dangerous. That they're taking out spots in society, infiltrating our ministry, polluting our bloodlines. You taught us that, and now you can hardly complain that you were listened, grandfather. Voldemort came and started the fire, but *you* gathered the wood for decades. It was all there. You planted the ambers in any young mind you could find."

His grandfather says nothing, but it's clear on his face that he doesn't understand, that he doesn't agree with Sirius.

"We never taught you to obey orphaned, no named half-bloods," he utters, eventually.

Sirius laughs. "Oh, I see. So you'd be alright with the war, if only Voldemort was a pureblood."

"No. A pureblood, a disciplined, rich, well-bred pureblood wouldn't have started a war. There was no need for it. We were-and sill are- the upper class. We weren't at risk. We could have kept the mudbloods in check, without violence, as we did for centuries. If Voldemort were a pureblood, he wouldn't be killing *purebloods*." He tilts his head. "Bella brags her precious lord found a way to kill Poros in the Parkinson Manor. And while I know someone of his skill could bring those ancient wards down-" a scowl. "When I went to pay my respects, the wards were intact."

Sirius looks away.

"Poros sealed his manor, tightened his wards, excluded everyone from entering them, paranoid as he was. Anyone but Blacks. I was always welcomed there, and so was Regulus."

"It wasn't Regulus," Sirius whispers, staring at his feet.

A tense silence, and then a sigh. “Poros was rash. He wasn’t smart in his disdain. The Parkinsons are not as strong and well protected as the Blacks, and never will be. But it is irritating, isn’t it? Many purebloods are dying in this war. If Voldemort were a pureblood, this wouldn’t be happening. So yes, his blood status matters. However, we are far past that. The war cannon be stopped. What remains is to navigate it. Whoever wins- the dark lord, the Ministry, Dumbledore’s sect- we need to land on our feet. Are you spying for Dumbledore?”

Sirius shrugs.

“Boy-”

“I’m not a boy,” he spits at his grandfather, finally looking up, just in time to see a muscle jumping in that proud jaw.

“Sirius,” he corrects. “We have Bella high up in Voldemort’s ranks. While she’s no longer a Black by name, she is a loyal girl. She will look out for our family interests.”

Sirius sneers at him. “A woman? Why, grandfather, who’d have thought you’d search for salvation in a *‘useless little girl that doesn’t know her place’*?”

It was what they used to call Bella. Their grandfathers. All her life, they tried to put her in her place.

“A Black woman is worth five good men,” his grandfather says, shameless. “In any case, she and her husband are high up in Voldemort’s ranks. Narcissa’s husband enjoys the same privilege. If Voldemort wins, they will speak for us. I am highly respected in the Ministry, and I am getting Regulus a job there. So we will be covered on that side. And you are, apparently, quite well regarded by the other pesky half-blood, just in case Dumbledore gets out of this war with even more influence and glory than he already has.” He nods to himself. “We are in a suitable position, no matter how the war ends.”

Sirius stares at him. “I won’t survive the war,” he says. “You don’t know how it is- the balance act- Dumbledore and Voldemort-I don’t even know what I’m doing half the time.”

It feels good to confess, to say it out loud. “I don’t even know who- I am not sure what outcome will be worse.”

His grandfather holds his gaze. “It’s irrelevant. I imagine you are torn. Between your blood traitor friends and Voldemort and the illusion of power that he offers. He is awfully charismatic, and he has a knack for guessing what young, lost boys most desire in life.” His grandfather stands. “I came to make things easier for your conscience. You don’t need to decide who you are truly loyal to, between those two. You are loyal to *family*. Not to Voldemort, not to Dumbledore. Keep that inside your head, inside your heart, and you will see how much easier it gets. You will survive the war. You have to.”

Sirius stands, too. His mouth is dry.

“Grandfather, I am already balancing the two half-bloods, as you call them. I can’t deal with another old bugger demanding things from me. I can’t.”

It's too much. It's bad enough- wanting to impress Voldemort, not wanting to disappoint Dumbledore. But his grandfather- well. That's another matter entirely.

His grandfather smiles. "All I ask of you is to survive. To remember us. All I ask is that when you have to make tough choices, think of *us*, first. Make the decisions that what would help us." He walks back to the window, looking up at the sky.

"If you follow the stars, you will never be led astray. And the stats are in your heart, if only you listen close enough, if only you close your eyes and focus on the blood pumping through your veins. All Blacks before you were simply born as such," his grandfather says. "I was a Black, and I never questioned the path in front of me, the path my father and his father before him took. My son had no choice in it, either."

"Not this again-" Sirius attempts to interrupt the reproach that is surely coming. The 'you abandoned us' speech.

But his grandfather holds up a hand; Sirius was never one to be silenced, never one to respect authority.

But this man is too much like his father; a man that Sirius can remember since he was born.

He shuts up, instinctively.

"Some Blacks break under the greatness that is our birthright; the burden that it can become. They flee, weak and terrified."

Sirius' jaw ticks.

"You, Sirius, you are the only one of us that chooses to be a Black. You were born one, but now you can choose to be one once more."

He looks at Sirius, face made of stone. "Your mother, your friends, the poison they poured into your mind, Dumbledore, the modern world and now Voldemort- they all try to *unmake* you. They tried and will keep trying to transform you into something else. But you choose Black. When I look upon you, I see one of us. I see my *son*. When all this will be done with, when the dust settles, there will be loss. There will be death and ruin. Either Voldemort or Dumbledore will be gone. But the Noble and Most Ancient house of Black will keep standing. You will make sure of it. You will choose us. You will choose family. And that is how we win."

(-)

Sirius had just woken up when he hears someone knocking at his door.

What now?

After Voldemort, Dumbledore and his grandfather, all in one bloody night, he's had quite enough of life.

But when he opens the door, he finds James waiting on the other side.

Something inside Sirius relaxes.

"Come in," he says, because James doesn't barge in, as he usually does.

James offers him a smile; not his usual bright one, but it's a smile.

"You don't look too well," he notices, when they sit in the living room, brown eyes searching Sirius' face.

"You wouldn't believe the night I had," Sirius says, rubbing his eyes. "I feel like a Quaffle, tossed between Dumbledore and Voldemort."

And his family, but he doesn't mention that.

James softens, his tentative smile disappearing.

"I'm alright," Sirius hurries to add. "Just- drained, I suppose." He sighs. "I was actually about to visit you, once I had a shower. James, listen-"

"No." James raises a hand. "I wanted to-"

"No, let me apologise-"

"Sirius," James interrupts him. "I- listen, I know you say horrible shit when you're drunk and angry."

I wasn't drunk, Sirius almost points out. He wasn't even particularly angry that night at the pub, when he cursed those men. But James knows that already. If he wants to pretend, if it's easier to pretend, then…

"I know you don't mean it, alright?" James says, face honest and a bit desperate. "I know you don't. And Lily- gods, Lily knows that, too. It's just that I'm trying to start a family, Sirius. I want a child. And you'll be like a second father to any kid I have."

Sirius' heart constricts. "James," he whispers.

"While I know- Lily knows- you say stupid shit sometimes, my kid will be a half-blood, Sirius."

"I know. Gods, James, I don't care," Sirius begs, desperate himself. "I would never-"

"I know. But he or she will be just a kid. I don't want them hearing the man they'll love and adore spitting out words like that. I already know any child of mine will think the world of you, mate. They'll love you as much as all of us do. I need to know that no matter how upset you are, you won't call someone a half-blood or a mud..*you know*, in their hearing."

“I won’t,” Sirius says, hastily. “James, I won’t- I promise I won’t say that shit again, alright? To anyone, ever again.”

James nods. “Look, you know mum and dad-” his voice cracks when he mentions his parents, and Sirius stands and goes to sit by him, a hand on his shoulder. “They were nothing like your family. But they still said things, harmless enough, but I was raised with preconceptions, too. And I still hold some of them, Lily says. I can’t even realise when I’m saying or implying something insulting. Even after she explains to me why I’m wrong, sometimes I don’t get it. But I just remember not to do it again. It’s hard- I know it’s hard to forget all of that- I mean, even mum- you know she always spoke up for muggleborns, she loved Lily, but when I told them I’m marrying her…they had this *reaction*. They hid it, but gods, the first meeting between them and Mr and Mrs Evans was painful.”

“I know.”

Kind and tolerant as the Potters had been, they were still purebloods, completely unfamiliar with most muggle things. And they were rich. Not rich like the Blacks, but rich indeed, especially compared to Lily’s middle class, working family.

And class always seemed to count- no matter if someone was deemed a blood traitor or a purist, they came together with little difficulty.

The Potters were much closer with Sirius, more comfortable around him than they were around Peter and Remus. *“Our second son,”* they’d call him, affectionate, and Mr Potter talked about his aunt Dorea, who was also Sirius’ great aunt and a thrice or so removed cousin.

When his friends came to Grimmauld to visit Sirius, James was at ease, while the other two…not so much.

Especially in the first two years, when all James knew from his parents was that it was bad to judge people by blood and to never say ‘mudblood’, but he wasn’t so concerned with all that- he found Grimmauld ‘awesome’ with all its artefacts and secret rooms. Regulus accepted him- he was jealous of how close Sirius was with James, but Regulus would take James in his room and show him quidditch books, talk about their favourite teams. At the Black’s country manor, James played quidditch with Regulus, Evan and Avery, while Remus and Peter stood by themselves, weary.

Of course, James grew, and he started to like Lily, and suddenly he felt more strongly about blood purity. The war outside Hogwarts became worse, people started dying, and James wasn’t as comfortable in Sirius’ home; he wouldn’t talk with Evan and Avery anymore, sneered at them at Hogwarts in their common classes.

Rabastan, who was ‘cool’ when James was twelve, suddenly became a ‘disgusting purist’.

“In any case, if *I* still have some issues, no wonder you do, what with the way you were raised. But you were doing so much better, in the last years, you know? After you ran away. I suppose now you have to play Death Eater, and they talk like that all the time, so it must just-” James shrugs. “I understand, Sirius. But I can’t have you talk like that.”

“Yes,” Sirius agrees. “I won’t. I promise.”

James smiles at him. Sirius pulls him into a one arm hugged, seated as they are.

“How’s that going, anyway?” Sirius asks, to change the subject. “The kid part-”

“Well, we’re certainly having fun trying.” James winks. “But nothing so far.”

Sirius pats his back. “Worry not, mate. Soon enough, we’ll have a little Potter waddling around.”

“How about you and Marlene? Wouldn’t it be great if we were to have kids the same age? Send them off to Hogwarts together so they can terrorise McGonagall?”

Sirius snorts.

“Come on, you’re twenty! What are you waiting for?”

Quite possible another vestige of his and James’ upbringing. Sirius knows it wasn’t Lily that wanted to get married so young, nor have a child as fast. But James is a pureblood, and purebloods marry fast and get the family started as soon as possible. Mr and Mrs Potter married young, too, but they just couldn’t conceive, not until very late in their lives. ‘Our little miracle’, they called James, because he showed up when they didn’t think it would happen anymore.

Marlene’s mother, not just any pureblood, but from the Twenty-Eight is just like the rest of them, no matter how she disowns her family. She keeps insinuating Sirius should propose every time he goes over for dinner. She doesn’t even like him that much, but *‘it’s just how things are done’*.

“Mate, Marlene and I can barely take care of ourselves. Imagine a kid in this house.” Sirius waves a hand around, asking James to take in the empty liquor bottles, the ashtrays, the potions Marlene is experimenting with lying around in vials.

Bella’s elves don’t come anymore, not since Marlene moved in full-time. Bella said she won’t encourage this ‘nonsense’.

“Well, better get it together. ‘Cause my kid will come to this house,” James says. “Oh...and- I mean, eventually, would you mind putting those ‘toujours pur’ goblets away? It’s weird for Lily to drink from them.”

Sirius feels a wave of irritation- *it’s my fucking family motto, James, it’s been around for a thousand years, I’m sorry it insults Lily*- but he quickly squashes it away. Of course Lily doesn’t like them. Sirius never thought about it, about serving her drinks in those goblets.

“Consider them gone,” Sirius says.

It’s just some goblets. They mean nothing. Certainly they aren’t worth as much as James’ company.

The world looks better, the weight on his shoulder lighter now that he and James are talking again.

(-)

Sirius is sure this is a punishment for knowing about the Horcrux.

He's sent on a mission. It was about time, sure, he's been a Death Eater for almost a year, but he doesn't think it's a coincidence Voldemort picked this moment to do it, to have Sirius actively involved in the war.

He's tying me closer to him; he's backing me into a corner, so my freedom will be tied with his fate.

At least he's not being made to hurt anyone he knows or loves.

They're in Ireland. A bunch of dark wizards there had refused to join Voldemort.

"We'll teach them refusing our lord is not wise," Rodolphus tells them.

Sirius doesn't recognise the other four Death Eaters. He knows Rabastan and Rodolphus, but not the others. That doesn't mean the others don't know him. Maybe one of them recognises Sirius, could be able to testify against him in the future.

Is this the paranoia all the Death Eaters are subjected to?

They ambush seven men as they come out of a pub. Sirius tries to hate it, but he loves it, instead.

He tells himself these are strangers, dark wizards themselves. There's nothing to feel guilty about.

There was a plan in place, but Sirius instantly deviates from it, ignores Rodolphus' previous orders, his insistence they must stick together, work as a team, cause as little destruction as possible.

"Don't kill them unless you have to. We're just teaching them a lesson, yes?" Rodolphus also said, yet by the time they're done, three Irish men are dead.

Sirius didn't kill anyone, though he came close. He didn't need to kill. He'd always been a good duelist, but he's shocked to discover how much better he got after all those lessons with Voldemort.

It's so easy, he plows through opposition fast and efficiently, Voldemort's voice and advice in his head on a loop.

Sirius is high on the adrenaline of fighting for the following week, restless, unable to stay put in one place.

“Rodolphus told me you’ve done well,” Voldemort says when they see each other at the cabin. “Of course, I didn’t need him to tell me. I had no doubt you’d do well.”

“Is he still upset I brought that building down?” Sirius asks, gulping down some water in between duelling sessions.

“He did want to be discrete,” Voldemort answers with a smile. “I am sure he’s displeased all the newspapers in Britain and Ireland keep publishing pictures of the destruction you left behind.”

“Blacks weren’t born to be discrete,” Sirius says, defiant. But Voldemort doesn’t seem upset the incursion in Ireland gained so much publicity.

“I believe that was Bella’s observation when Rodolphus complained about it.”

Voldemort is more careful in the duels, now. He doesn’t hurt Sirius as much, and it’s annoying.

A part of him is convinced Voldemort is aware Sirius figured out that Voldemort fancies him, and now he’s engaging in a fucked up courtship by abstaining from causing Sirius pain.

He does nothing else to show interest, though. Why? Sirius keeps waiting for Voldemort to bring it up, for some escalation, but there is none, outside this new reluctancy to wipe the floor with Sirius.

He still wins easily, sends Sirius to the ground, and then helps him up. That’s new, too. Or so he thinks- he isn’t sure if Voldemort helped him up before, if he *physically* lifted Sirius up.

In one of those instances, when they’re so close to each other, with Voldemort’s cold, boney fingers wrapped around Sirius’ elbow, with their faces mere inches apart, it dawns on Sirius that they’ll eventually end up fucking.

It’s just inevitable, what with the way Sirius’ blood heats up, even with how cold Voldemort’s touch is. His heart gallops, more excited and nervous by the proximity than he’d been about the duel, and Sirius just *knows* sex is in their future.

Well, Dumbledore did tell me to get close, gain his confidence, he thinks, sarcastic.

The idea of seducing Voldemort on purpose, to gain more confidence, sickens him as soon as it comes, even if it was just a sarcastic thought.

Sirius spends hours thinking about how they’ll end up fucking. *Will Voldemort finally make a move? He’ll have to.*

Sirius won’t. He won’t go there. Well, maybe if he’s very drunk, if he breaks up with Marlene- *no, no, I won’t. I won’t initiate this lunacy.*

So it will have to be Voldemort.

What will he do?

Will I reject him, at least at first? What will I say? Sorry, I have a girlfriend? I don't like men?

And how will he convince me?

"Sirius?"

"Huh?"

"Did you hear a word of what I said?" Marlene inquires, eyes narrowed.

He blinks a couple of times and she comes into focus. They're having dinner, apparently, but Sirius notices he hadn't touched his food at all. "Sorry. I have some stuff on my mind."

(-)

It's Tuesday, but when Sirius' mark burns, it doesn't lead him to the cabin, but to Voldemort's front door.

Oh, dear, he thinks with trepidation.

Is this it? Will he finally make a move?

Sirius knocks; the door opens on its own, and he steps inside. He's only been in that room for a handful of hours, but he revisited it in his head for so many times that it feels very familiar to him.

He hears noises coming from the kitchen, so he heads that way.

"No duelling?" he asks, trying to sound disappointed. Instead, he sounds almost breathless, because Voldemort is surrounded by pots and chopping boards and food.

"You expressed a desire to see me cook."

No, no, I did not. I only asked if you cook, that's not expressing a desire to-

Sirius breathes in. Is this a date?

He doesn't correct Voldemort. There's no point to it- Voldemort will find a way to twist Sirius' words from that night until he proves his point.

Just stay cool.

“It’s five in the afternoon,” he says. “I know you’re very old, but surely it is too early for dinner, even for the ancient people.”

Voldemort smiles, and *yeah, he definitely likes me.* He’s sure no one else talks back to him this way, on a weekly basis.

“I’ll forgive your ignorance, but you’ll learn it takes some time to prepare dinner,” he says. “It will be at least an hour before it’s done.”

And then he turns back to his chopping board.

“Do you expect me to help?” Sirius asks, drawing closer. “I hope not.”

“You’re my guest,” Voldemort replies. “Besides, I haven’t lived this long only to die from food poisoning. Sit, Sirius.”

There’s a bottle of wine on the small table, chilled to perfection. Even the goblet is chilled, a thin crust of ice inside it.

Sirius wishes it was firewhsikey, instead. Wine is not enough to get him drunk, not as drunk as he needs to be to have fucking dinner with Voldemort.

Don’t think of it as a date- think of it as another test, another hoop to jump through. You have training, anyway- all those tense dinners with your family.

Only, of course, this is nothing like dinners with his family.

Voldemort’s cooking, to start. And Sirius can’t stay quiet. All the lessons his father taught him about silence breaking lesser men fly from his head, and Sirius starts talking and doesn’t stop.

He starts by being an arse, snarky and mocking, but as he watches Voldemort chop and stir, he becomes more comfortable.

It’s like watching someone make a potion, only the smells are far better.

Delicious, actually. Soon enough the room is filled with tempting scents, and Sirius’ stomach growls in response.

He asks Voldemort where he learned to cook, and he listens about the Orphanage again, how he helped around in the kitchen because he could steal food easier that way; Voldemort talks about a flat he rented in Knockturn Alley after he was done with Hogwarts, too.

Sirius can’t imagine someone dared to underpay the dark lord, that he had to count knuts and learn how to make the best of them.

“I’d have given up,” Sirius says, shuddering to imagine such an existence.

Having to work long hours, with customers no less, for a handful of coins, only to go to a shabby flat later and have to cook-

Terrible.

Voldemort looks over his shoulder. “You wouldn’t have,” he declares, confident, as if he’s certain Sirius would have managed to go through such a shitty life.

“Probably not,” Sirius says when Voldemort turns his attention to the stove again. “But I’d have found some generous lady to help me out.”

“You’re far too proud to accept charity.”

Sirius fills his goblet- still perfectly cold- with more wine. “It wouldn’t be charity. I would have earned every coin.”

Can you stop bringing up sex? That would be great!

Blessedly, Voldemort doesn’t comment on it.

When it’s finally time to eat, seated at that tiny table meant for one, Sirius hesitates long enough for Voldemort to stick his fork in Sirius’ plate.

“Hey!” Sirius exclaims.

“To reassure you it’s not poisoned,” Voldemort says, after he swallows. And then, with a smile. “But you forgot to be concerned about poison, haven’t you?”

Sirius did forget. He remembers their first meetings, when Sirius would swallow a bezoar before accepting water from Voldemort at the cabin.

Merlin, but we’re so close. If he’s going to ask Sirius to join him for dinner again, Sirius will have to buy him a bigger table.

The food is good, because apparently Voldemort is skilled in anything.

“See, you should have become a chef,” Sirius quips after a few bites. “Fed people instead of killing them. Wouldn’t that have been nice?”

“No,” Voldemort answers, simply.

He doesn’t eat much himself, mostly plays with his food, preferring to stare at Sirius as he eats.

And Sirius does eat- not only because the food is good, but because he’s nervous about what will happen once he stops eating.

Nothing happens, he finds out eventually.

Voldemort asks him for a fag, and they smoke for some minutes, before Voldemort says Sirius should go.

Why am I disappointed instead of relieved? Or rather, he’s relieved *and* disappointed at once.

On his way out, he notices a recent addition in the crammed sitting room.

A grand piano.

“What’s that?”

“A piano,” Voldemort explains, as if Sirius is an idiot.

“Thanks,” Sirius spits. “I meant, why is it here?”

“You said you can play. So next week you’ll play for me.”

Sirius stops in his track, stares at him incredulously.

“Repayment for dinner,” Voldemort continues, lightly taking Sirius’ elbow and dragging him to the door.

“But-”

“Goodnight, Sirius.” Voldemort pushes him out of the house and closes the door in his face.

(-)

They’re in the clearing from the werewolf wedding, only this time, Sirius doesn’t leave.

This time, when Voldemort pulls out the shard of glass from his back, Sirius turns around and kisses him, fingers pulling at that brown hair, with only a few grey hairs through it, like precious metal through ore.

The sleepy werewolves are all around, but Sirius doesn’t care. He’s kissing Voldemort with a savage hunger, an unrestrained need.

It feels amazing, and Sirius backs Voldemort into a tree, kissing, touching, trying to get his robe off.

He wants to see him. He always wants to see another man naked, but he never allows himself, tries to be satisfied with blowjobs in dark muggle pubs, but now that won’t be enough.

Voldemort won’t let Sirius back off, he won’t allow Sirius to hide and run away in shame.

And Sirius feels no shame when he’s ripping apart Voldemort’s robe. Because Voldemort isn’t just a man, is he? He’s half a god.

Fucking a god won’t bring shame to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

Long, cold fingers that Sirius saw curled around a wand, bringing destruction of unfathomable proportions, now close around Sirius’ prick. The Horcrux is on one of those

fingers, the metal hard against his skin.

Pleasure explodes inside him, and Sirius wakes up.

He blinks, disorientated, finds himself in his bedroom, in his bed, his own fingers around his softening cock, warm come sticking to his fingers, pants and stomach.

What the fuck is wrong with me? He lays there, panting quietly, hoping he won't wake Marlene. *What did he do to me?*

It's escalating fast, getting out of Sirius' control- only a few weeks ago, he didn't even think of Voldemort that way, and now- now he's losing his fucking mind.

You thought of him that way. You almost got hard in that forest after the werewolf wedding. Just because he touched your fucking back. You just refused to acknowledge it, blamed it on the transformation and Padfoot's left over feelings.

Besides, Sirius shouldn't be surprised. He knows he's prone to obsession; it's in his blood, he suspects. Sirius' obsessions come strong and have a terrible hold over him. They rapidly spin out of control, and this is no different.

They go away as fast as they come, Sirius tries to reassure himself, quietly pulling his hand out of his pants, waving it over himself, casting a cleaning spell.

This shall pass.

They only go away after you got what you wanted, a masochistic part of him reminds him.

(-)

Why is he holding back? Sirius wonders after another Tuesday spent close to Voldemort.

He is definitely getting more touchy than he's been before; Voldemort's hands linger on Sirius' arm longer when he shows him how to cast a certain curse.

But that's all he does.

What's stopping him?

Voldemort helps him back to his feet, and there's this moment when they're very close, chest to chest, robes touching-

Marlene, Sirius thinks, and he backs off, even if he doesn't want to.

They resume the duel; when Sirius goes back home, he shuts himself off in the bathroom and imagines what would have happened if he hadn't backed off.

(-)

Sirius takes the slim book of sheet music, looks at the cover. “Rachmaninoff?”

“It suits you.” Voldemort walks to the couch, touches Sirius’ shoulder as he goes. “Very masculine.”

Sirius opens the book, feels his stomach drop. He reads the music, takes a deep breath and walks to the piano. He settles in the seat, then splays the book open on the stand. He allows himself just one glance at Voldemort before he starts playing; the man reclines on the couch with his legs crossed, gazing at Sirius.

Heat flares in Sirius’s stomach. Voldemort’s eyes are set on him like the spotlights of the world’s stage.

The book contains Rachmaninoff’s preludes, and though Sirius has never played them—his piano instructor’s tastes leant more towards Beethoven and Mozart, pieces to accompany Narcissa’s violin—he thinks he can stumble through them. As he measures his breathing and adjusts himself, he settles his fingers on the keys with a deep sense of dread and finality.

“It’s been a while,” Sirius prefaces.

He flips through a few pages until he finds one that looks doable. Before he starts, he runs through a few scales. Fragments of memories, lessons and bits of advice, some in his instructors’s voice, some in his own mother’s harsh one, come back to him. It lends the confidence he needs to start playing.

Back straight, attention to his hands, eyes scanning the page, willing himself to play what comes next, and Sirius does not even hear the music, not really. He hears his own blood rushing through his body. He hears his heart bouncing around his ribcage.

With a final breath, Sirius withdraws his fingers from the keys as soon as possible. His mother always chided him for that; *“let the last note play, reverberate,”* she would say. *“Stop cutting it short.”* But in this moment Sirius slices the sound sharply, as if with a knife, and closes his eyes.

He hears Voldemort move to stand behind him, feels Voldemort’s hands curling over his shoulders.

Sirius’ eyes remain shut.

“I knew Rachmaninoff would be a good fit for you,” Voldemort tells him. “Go on. Play something else.”

This time, his fingers feel less stiff. This time, Sirius can feel the music, can hear it, not just read it. He stares at the sheet of notes, but in his mind’s eye he can see Grimmauld music

room, can scent his mother's perfume, can hear Narcissa' accompanying violin.

"So beautiful," he can hear his grandmother whispering. *"Brings tears to my eyes."*

"Would you stop making him play?" his father says, voice cold. "He has more important things to focus on. Have you finished your Charms assignment, Sirius?"

The images shatter in his head, the lively, bright day, his father's stern presence, his grandmother's flattery, Narcissa's violin.

They're replaced with a dark night- many dark nights. No grandmother, no Cissa, no father.

Sirius plays for long hours, getting lost in the notes so he won't think of his father dying upstairs.

He knows his mother listens, leaning on the doorway. He knows she's crying.

Sirius breathes out, back with Voldemort in the present, and he lets the last note linger, doesn't cut it short anymore.

"You put on a beautiful show for me."

And isn't this all just a show for Voldemort, an amusement, an inconsequential holiday from Voldemort's real life? A brief interlude from murder and chaos? Is Sirius not just an intriguing oddity, a rarity, a novelty? And does he not want Sirius to keep performing for him, to keep him entertained? Like a spoiled child, Sirius fears what will happen when Voldemort stops being entertained. When he grows bored of him, reaches the end of all of Sirius's tricks.

"The Russians suit you," Voldemort says, as Sirius stands. "The immensity of their sounds, the constant underpinning of melancholy." He watches Sirius, eyes burning. "Like a glove."

"I'm better with a guitar," Sirius says, so he can shake the memory of those long painful nights after his father stopped speaking.

"I doubt it," Voldemort answer, and Sirius doesn't know if he's saying it just so next time Sirius will bring his guitar and play for him, or if he really doubts it, if he somehow knows that the few years Sirius practiced on guitar on his own will never compare to the many, many years he'd spent with the grand piano, with the best instructors correcting any little fault, with his mother always near. The only activity that they could enjoy together without screams or bitterness.

She liked Sirius playing, and Sirius liked to play for her.

She liked magical pieces, but if there was one thing muggle allowed in his house- small booklets, sheets of muggle pianists. When he was very small, when he'd need special pianos so his little feet could reach, she'd lie to him and tell him Mozzart was a squib, that he was of magical stock.

"Where did you learn about Rachmaninoff, anyway?" he asks, putting some distance between him and Voldemort. "I doubt they taught you at that orphanage."

“You don’t have to be rich to develop a refined understanding of arts, Sirius. And, as you keep pointing out, I am *old*. I’ve seen and heard many things around the world.”

Sirius thinks of Voldemort on his travels, that night, as he lies in bed besides Marlene.

She’s exceedingly sweet every Tuesday when he returns home, because she imagines Sirius must be hurt after his meetings with Voldemort. She gives him space and talks softly to him.

In reality, Sirius is having fun duelling, or eating dinner, or playing the piano.

He shoves away the guilt for deceiving her, for letting her imagine the worst, and keeps thinking about Voldemort and his travels. A younger Voldemort, that looked like Tom Riddle, like the boy from the picture in Sirius’ drawer. Handsome and powerful, daring and unbending.

An older Voldemort, all the more powerful, not as handsome but somehow even more attractive, more charismatic, more refined than poor Tom Riddle.

Sirius imagines him in opera houses, in Moscow or Vienna. He’s alone, surrounded by couples-

Or maybe he wasn’t alone. Maybe there was someone with him. A man. And when the show was over, they went back to a private place, and-

Sirius sighs, turns on his side and puts his pillow over his head.

“Are you alright?” Marlene asks, a gentle hand on his back.

Sirius laughs, sounds muffled by the pillow, because he is *not* alright.

He’s also hard, his skin hot, so he throws the pillow away, turns to face Marlene and kisses her. He tries to get lost in her scent, in the feminine swell of her breasts, in the familiarity and trust they have built between themselves, in the love she has for him.

(-)

Bella’s elf pops up in front of him, just as he’s about to leave the house and head to St Mungo’s on his bike to pick Marlene up.

She was supposed to get out earlier, but she sent a Patrons informing Sirius an emergency came up and they need all Healers there.

“Sir must come,” the elf squeaks, voice shaking. “Sir must come, urgently. Master Rodolphus orders it, says Mistress Bella needs sir.”

“Take me,” Sirius demands, grabbing the elf’s extended hand. A heavy feeling settles in his gut, that has nothing to do with the smooth Apparition.

And then, as soon as he steps foot in the Manor, he hears it: an anguished, infuriated yell- Bella’s. Sirius’ heart drops and he whirls along the hallway.

“LET ME GO! LET ME GO! I WILL KILL THEM!”

Sirius enters the sitting room to see Rodolphus holding Bella tightly, her back to his chest, big arms around her torso and waist.

Rabastan is trying to take the wand out of her hand, but she’s kicking at him, biting, screaming.

“Bella?”

They all turn to look at him, and Rodolphus lets her go.

Bella whimpers, rushing to him. He catches her in his arms, and she sobs in his shirt.

“What-” Sirius tries to ask, confused and scared.

“Evan is dead,” Rodolphus says, and Bella screams, fingers digging in Sirius’ sides.

No. No, that can’t be. I just saw him at those blasted parties.

He gawks at Rodolphus, unable to comprehend it. Evan is Sirius’ age. They’ve went to Hogwarts together. They learned how to play Quiddicth together.

Rodolphus’ jaw ticks uncontrollably. Beside him, Rabastan is unusually pale.

“They killed him! They killed Evan,” Bella says, body racked with sobs, voice brimming with pain and rage. “I’m going to eviscerate them! I’M GOING TO TEAR THEM APART!”

Sirius’ arm close tighter around her back, instinctively, when he feels she’s about to pull away.

“LET ME GO!”

He doesn’t. He’s numb, body operating independently from his mind- in his head, he’s still revisiting many, many memories with Evan, disbelieving.

Rodolphus is close now, and they’re both trying to contain Bellatrix. Rabastan is trying to help, too.

Her wand hand is trapped between Sirius’ arm and his body, but magic comes out of her, anyway, strong and unstable.

She struggles so fiercely that distantly Sirius wonders how are they supposed to stop her from going on a killing spree, without resorting to hurting her.

Someone's asking her to calm down, and he's not sure who. Can't be him, because he knows better than to ask that of Bella. In the struggle, in the shock, nothing make sense. Nothing seems real.

And then, a softer voice, delicate hands between them.

"Shhh, shhh." A flash of blonde hair, a slim arm. "Let her go, Rodolphus, I have her. Come here, Bella."

The magic retreats from the room, slowly. Bella ceases struggling and Narcissa squeezes herself between them, until she's holding her sister.

Bella composes herself, if barely. At least she's not trying to curse them anymore. She doesn't seem to notice when Narcissa takes her wand from her.

And Narcissa is probably the only person that could take Bella's wand away without a fight.

Bella still talks of wanting to kill, but her energy seems to have left her.

"Lucius is at the Ministry," Narcissa says, and Sirius thinks Rodolphus said it too, earlier, yelled it at Bella, to no effect. "He'll learn who is responsible, and you can act then, but you have to calm down now, Bella. Breathe with me."

Time seems to stop for a while. Sirius is frozen; Rabastan stares off into space. Rodolphus' jaw keeps twitching, but he doesn't move otherwise.

And then Voldemort comes into the room.

Bella rushes to him in the blink of an eye; even Voldemort didn't see her coming before she's plastered to his chest.

He seems taken aback for a second, uncomfortable, but it's gone in a flash, and his arm goes around her shoulders.

"I want them dead," she whispers. "All of them. I WANT THEM DEAD," Bella cries, voice muffled by his robes, but not enough. "Every Auror that was there, their entire families, I want to wipe their legacies off this earth."

Long fingers pet her head. "My condolences, Bella. He was a remarkable man. His death will be avenged."

Narcissa moves, too, eyeing Voldemort carefully. She doesn't like him, it's so painfully obvious. At least for Sirius, who knows every subtle gesture on that face.

"I'll go keep aunt and mother company," she whispers to Sirius.

Bella doesn't even notice her sister leaving, clinging to Voldemort, who looks more and more uncomfortable as the seconds trickle by.

Sirius goes to save him. He pries Bella off him, gently. Voldemort quickly walks away, taking shelter beside Rodolphus. They speak in low voices, but Sirius is too shocked to listen, to care.

He holds Bella, and she holds him in return.

He just can't wrap his mind around the fact that Evan is dead.

(-)

Bella had just calmed, if slightly, when Lucius walks in.

He doesn't take the time to kneel, but Sirius supposes the kneeling isn't that important in a crises situation, anyway.

He has a thick roll of parchment in his hands. Even stoic Lucius looks a tad affected.

He hands the roll to Voldemort.

"Who killed him?" Bella asks, voice shrill, wiping her eyes and stepping away from Sirius.

Voldemort's eyes seem frozen on the parchment. They had fixed on something and they don't move.

A handful of seconds pass before he looks up.

"Moody," he says. "And a few others."

Bella shrikes with fury. "Who else-" she lunges for the parchment, but Voldemort puts it inside his robe.

"We'll take care of every one of them. But now you must support your family. Lucius, accompany her to the Rosier Manor; your wife is already there. Extend my condolences to Evan's parents."

"I'll take her," Sirius says, his voice sounding as if it comes from far away. He doesn't want Bella out of his sight.

She succumbs to another set of tears and sobs as they walk to the fireplace in the hallway.

"Wait, wait." She places a hand on his shoulder, and he holds her waist with one hand, wipes her tears with the other. "Wait," she keeps saying, and he waits, until she gives one last shudder.

She wipes her face, casts a glamour so her eyes don't look bloodshot anymore, and then she nods, determined.

Stepping out of the fireplace is like entering a tomb.

Narcissa is there, on one side of Evan's mother. On the other side, Druella sits.

Mrs Rosier rocks back and forth on the couch, eyes vacant, pain beyond tears.

"Aunt," Bella says, kneeling at her feet, taking her hands. "Aunt, your pain is our pain. I am deeply sorry."

"Oh, Bella," she whispers. "My boy- my sweet boy-" Her voice breaks and she shrinks inside herself, becomes smaller.

"Where is uncle?" Bella asks her mother, standing.

"He went to get Evan," Druella answers.

"He's bringing my son home."

"Shh, auntie," Narcissa murmurs.

Sirius approaches, feeling all sorts of nauseous. He could never deal with mourning, and this is especially difficult. Unexpected. Evan was his age, and it's just-

He breathes in, unsure of his welcome. He kneels in front the trio of women huddled on the couch.

He, too, takes Mrs Rosier's hand.

I'm sorry, he wants to say. *I can't believe this happened.*

But he can't say 'sorry'. The word sticks in his throat, because *Blacks don't apologise.*

He desperately searches for something, anything to say-

She looks at him as if in a daze, and she cups his cheek.

"Sirius?"

He nods.

"Oh, Sirius. Evan was just talking about you the other day. He was happy-" a dry sob. A tremor goes through her entire body. "He was happy to see you again. He always liked you."

"I like him, too," Sirius says, honest and then he realises from now on, he needs to say 'liked'. Past tense.

"Go back home, Sirius. Return to Grimmauld," she says. "You don't know- a mother- you don't know how a mother feels -to lose a son."

Bella intervenes, pulls Sirius back on his feet. She draws him a little away, and they stand by the fireplace, silent.

It's so *silent*.

Then Evan's sister comes with her husband, the older Yaxley. She takes Druella's place, throws herself in her mother's arms and suddenly the crying starts.

Bella sniffles at his side when she sees it, but controls herself rapidly.

Yaxley approaches them, putting distance between himself and the grieving mother and sister.

"Bellatrix," he says, taking her hand and lightly brushing his lips against the back of it. "Black," he says, when he lets go of Bella to turn to Sirius.

Sirius nods in acknowledgment.

House-elves appear, covering tables with black cloths, under Druella's watchful eye.

The fireplace roars to life and Sirius' mother comes through it, Regulus close behind her.

Her eyes quickly find Sirius, but she goes straight to the women on the couch.

Regulus looks shaken, pale. He looks scared.

Sirius puts a hand around his shoulders, drawing him close, and Bella hugs them both, tightly.

"I can't believe-" Regulus says. "Evan."

"Narcissa, help me take her upstairs to get dressed," his mother's voice comes, sharp and clear.

The women support Mrs Rosier between them, helping her climb the stairs.

In no time, more people arrive.

Family members, the closest ones.

Sirius and Bella are the only ones not dressed in their finest, and a spark of anger shoots through him.

How can all these people worry about how they look? How did they take time to put on special robes, to do their hair, when Evan is dead? How can they care about appearances-

His thoughts are cut short when Cygnus and Mr Rossier arrive.

They don't come through the fireplace, nor through the front door.

No, they come from the stairs leading to the dungeon, and Sirius thinks they Apparated there from the Ministry.

With Evan.

With the body.

Sirius suppresses a shiver, tightens his hand on Regulus' shoulder, who cannot suppress it.

When Mrs Rosier comes down, draped in black, hair made, supporting her weight on her daughter, she goes straight to the dungeon, Mr Rosier trailing behind them.

Silence falls over the room once more, even if it's crowded with people. It's heavy, suffocating, and Sirius can imagine Grimmauld filled with people, with family from all over, when his father died.

Everyone would have been there to pay their respects.

Everyone but Sirius.

The silence is pierced by a scream, the sound of a deeply wounded animal, a pain beyond words, and Sirius knows Mrs Rosier just saw Evan.

Evan, who just a couple of weeks ago was complaining his parents are pressuring him to marry; Evan, rolling his eyes, saying he doesn't understand what the hurry is.

'Our name must go on,' Sirius hears his mother in his head, and he finds her gaze across the room.

The Rosier name is gone. Just like that. It's not only Evan that died, but his family legacy. No more.

Vanquished, in a second.

Sirius finds it hard to breathe.

It's the worst moment for Cygnus to appear in front of him. Last they saw each other, Sirius had stabbed him, pushed a carving knife between his ribs.

"You will go upstairs and borrow a proper robe," he says, voice cold and harsh, eyes boring down on Bellatrix. "You will tell your blood traitor cousin to do the same. Shut up," he snarls, when Bella opens her mouth. "For once in your life, do what's proper. For once in your life, don't act like selfish brats-" his eyes briefly go to Sirius' before returning to his daughter. "-and be respectful. This is not about you and what you want to wear. A boy lies dead beneath us. His parents are destroyed. Don't cause a scene. Change.Now." Cygnus hisses every word. "And Regulus, pull yourself together and stop shaking. You're a Black, for Merlin's sake!"

Sirius wants to stab him again. Wants to grab the fire poker and bludgeon Cygnus to death with it.

But he's right-it is not about them, about what Sirius wants. It's about Evan. *Well, Evan is dead,* a voice reminds him, harshly. But it's about Mrs Rosier.

So Sirius allows Bella to pull him away from her father, lead him up the stairs.

(-)

When they return to the sitting room, Sirius in one of Mr Rosiers' robes, Bella in Mrs Rosier's, they find Regulus composed, no expression on his face.

Lucius, Rodolphus and Rabastan are there, too.

There are drinks on the tables with the black clothes, pitchers of water, decanters with firewhsikey, and some pumpkin juice for the only two kids dragged there.

Pictures of Evan had appeared everywhere, forcing Sirius to see his face every way he turns.

In one of the pictures he sees himself- no older than ten, scowling at the camera with Evan and Rabastan, an even younger Regulus trying to get into the picture with them, to hang around Sirius and his friends instead of being left behind.

Rabastan is boiling, his anger shining on his face. Sirius goes to his side. His anger is more palatable than the grief around, or the blank, carefully constructed faces.

They take a decanter of whiskey and keep it between themselves, downing glass after glass, as quick as they can.

And if Rabastan is angry, that's nothing compared to Rodolphus.

He's trying to keep it together, but he's always been as bad as Sirius at the 'perfect, cold pureblood' nonsense.

His jaw is twitching, his fingers keep flexing, as if wanting to hold his wand. He's restless, pacing back and forth; the other people give him a wide berth, throwing him cautious glances.

Mourners go down in pairs to 'say-goodbye' to Evan, and soon enough, almost everyone went through it.

Even Regulus went with their mother.

"Come," Bella says, hand over Sirius' elbow.

"I can't," he whispers. "I- Bella-"

Sirius doesn't do well with dead or sick people. Especially when they're related. Evan wasn't blood, but he was Bella's cousin, so he was Sirius' honorary cousin, too.

"I need you," she says, simply, and her glamours don't hold very well, her eyes clouded, red rimmed.

Cygnus gives her disapproving looks from across the room and Sirius will do something stupid soon, something bad indeed, if the man comes near her again, to put her down for not

acting right, the way he did all her childhood.

Sirius goes, Rodolphus flanking Bella on her other side, Narcissa and Lucius behind them.

They walk down the stairs; Sirius' head is pounding.

The open casket is laid on a wide table, with sturdy, tall legs.

At the head, Mr and Mrs Roiser stand. Well, he stands, made of marble. She's swaying, eyes gaunt, aged twenty years since Sirius saw her an hour ago.

She looks as dead as her son, even if Sirius does not look at Evan.

He looks at her, keeps his eyes on her, and does not look down, even when they approach them.

Bella breaks down again. She throws herself over Evan and sobs.

"Evan," she cries. "Oh, Evan."

Narcissa grabs Bella, tries to get her off the corpse.

"I'll avenge you, I swear. I swear it to the Mother. I'll rip them apart, the filthy dogs, I'll-"

"Shh," Narcissa says. "Bella, come now. Calm down."

Lucius joins in the effort.

Sirius just stands there, useless. Frozen.

Did Bella throw herself over father's coffin? Who took her off him?

Did mother and Regulus stand at father's head, face clean of tears? She, made of marble, Regulus trying not to collapse? With no Sirius there to support him?

"The dark lord sends his deepest condolences," Rodolphus is saying, as if from far away.

Sirius blinks rapidly, and focuses on his voice.

"He would like to come and pay his respects as soon as the others leave."

"Of course," Mr Rosier says. "He is always welcomed in our house."

He is the reason your son is dead, Sirius thinks. This is not some just war, some necessary war. This is stupid, and now Evan's dead and-

"It would mean the world to Evan," Mr Rosier says. "To know the dark lord respected him so."

"We all did," Rodolphus says. "And we will win. We will make sure to shape our world in the way Evan wanted it to look. And when they'll write books about it, his name will be

there, immortal. His sacrifice will not be forgotten. You have my word."

(-)

When Sirius receives the Prophet the following morning, Evan's death doesn't make the first page. He's on the second, a disparaging article. '*Terrorist'*. *'Death Eater'*. General shock that a boy from an excellent family was, in fact, a murderer.

On the first page, there are small pictures of twenty eight dark marks, with an article about twenty-eight dead muggleborns.

Rodolphus, Bella and Rabastan excused themselves early from the wake. Even Lucius left with them.

"Do you want to come?" Rodolphus asked. *"We'll make Britain remember Evan."*

"No," Sirius said.

"I want it," Regulus insisted, but Sirius didn't let him.

Twenty-eight. For twenty-eight sacred families. Even if three of those sacred families are blood traitors, on Dumbledore's side.

It's a message. A clear message, clearer than ever, that purebloods of the old way are with Voldemort.

The Aurors took one of their own, destabilised the Sacred Families, and now the public pays for it.

It marks the bloodiest night in the war so far.

Everyone is terrified. Muggleborns want to leave Britain. It was always clear what Death Eaters stand for, but no one ever put it so bluntly.

Voldemort's propaganda insists he's fighting against corruption in the Ministry, that his war is against the Muggles encroaching on their way of life.

But now the message is sent.

And the division is stronger than ever.

Sirius doesn't go to Evan's funeral, because it will be held on the plot where his father is buried.

But more than one hundred people attend it.

Few show up for the slaughtered muggleborns, in the following days. They're afraid to show up; Aurors warn attacks on mourners are possible.

Two of those muggleborns were Order Members.

Sirius refuses to attend their funerals. It's nothing to do with anything- he didn't go to his father's, he won't go to anyone's. He made a supreme effort for the Potters, but that was only because *James* needed him to.

However, the rest of the Order members don't take it like that. They take Sirius' absence to mean something else.

(-)

"They know where we live," Lily says, heated, in an Order meeting. "They killed twenty-eight people in a matter of hours! Five of those worked at the Ministry! Two were Hit Wizards! Two Order Members. And they so easily found them and killed them. In one night!"

Sirius hears the panic in her voice. Sees the dread in James' eyes.

McGonagall sniffs. "Lizzie was just eighteen," she says, pulling out a handkerchief, rubbing at her nose. "A girl."

"Moody killed a *boy*," Sirius snaps. "All bets are off now."

Dumbledore pierces him with a hard gaze.

Gideon looks disgusted with Sirius. "He was a Death Eater. Alastor is an Auror-"

"I told the Ministry- I told Alastor not to use lethal force," Dumbledore says, forcefully. "I tell all of you this."

"So it's our fault, you mean?" Fabian asks, incredulous.

"Of course not." Dumbledore glances at all of them, in turn. "Voldemort is ruthless, but he kept civilians out of it, mostly, until now. He was waiting for us to strike low, so he can unleash his cruelty and violence and call it 'revenge'. And now the Aurors gave him the excuse he was patiently expecting."

It wasn't Voldemort that planned the death of the muggleborns. Maybe he approved it, but Sirius doubts he was involved at all.

This was Rodolphus, Bella Lucius. Rabastan. Evan's friends. Evan's blood and family.

“Voldemort understands that while crushing the Ministry wouldn’t be hard for him, holding the country will, if he commits too many atrocities. He was careful to attack ‘corrupt’ Ministers, ‘brutal’ Aurors and hit wizards. In case he wins, he can stand there and say he rid Britain of bad people.”

“Well, now he won’t be able to say that,” Elphias says, heatedly. “Even if he calls it revenge for Rosier, who was indeed too young- Alastor shouldn’t have-“ Elphias shakes his head. “Even so, now Voldemort can’t claim his cause is anything but what it is- a savage take over.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore scratches his beard. “Now the true ugliness will begin. Protect your houses. Advise everyone you know to do the same, no matter how uninvolved they are. Avoid public places. Be exceedingly careful who you share your home address with, who you drink with at a pub. No one is safe anymore.”

If people were paranoid before, it’s nothing to what they are now.

And Sirius doesn’t know how he’ll handle being in the same room with Moody in the future.

He’s still in St Mungo’s. Apparently, Evan took a few pieces of Moody’s already disfigured face with him when he died.

He’s heavily guarded, at all times.

Moody knows to expect retribution; he understand Evan was a big deal. He knows the Death Eaters and Voldemort aren’t done, that a handful of dead civilians won’t satisfy them.

Sirius waits, too, tries to gleam what is coming, but no one will tell him anything, not even Bella that usually lets things slip in his presence.

Surprisingly, it is Rodolphus, of all people, that gives Sirius a clue.

“We’ll hit Moody where it most hurts him,” he says, catching Sirius’ eye, when Sirius keeps asking why Moody is still alive, hoping to get anything out of them.

But Sirius doesn’t get the message. He doesn’t know what would hurt Moody the most, and even if he knew, he certainly wouldn’t have understood the ramifications, or foreseen how it will play out.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said the slowburn is behind is, but I had to change things around. But I promise, next chapter will see Voldemort and Sirius finally give in.

About the Horcruxes- in the book, Bella was very panicked when she though Harry and Co broke into her Vault. And at her trial, she kept saying Voldemort will come back, as

if knowing for sure he is not dead. I know she didn't know about the Horcruxes in canon, but I figured I can work with that and have her know about the Cup given to her being a Horcrux here, but not about the others.

Thank you for reading and for your patience. I would love to hear your thoughts on this chapter!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marlene makes a face when Sirius starts purging the kitchen of anything that has his family motto engraved on it.

She doesn't help him, perched on the table, watching him with narrowed eyes, a cigarette hanging from between her lips.

"What?" he snaps, throwing some goblets into a box, the silver clanking loudly. "I wasn't aware you like them so much."

"I don't." She shrugs. Ash falls into her lap, clings to her dress. "You do, however. I don't understand why you have to hide them."

"You know why."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, sure. Fighting against Voldemort isn't enough, apparently. We need to throw away plates and goblets now. I bet everything that it wasn't even Lily that complained about the 'toutjours pur' stuff, but James-"

"Don't be difficult!"

"Whatever." She hops off the table, throwing her hair over her shoulder.

Sirius puts a blanket over the chair in his office, to cover the motto and the coat of arms Bella engraved on it. Not that James has many reasons to be in his office- Sirius almost never uses it, after all- but just to play it safe.

After that, he takes a quick tour of the house, making sure he got rid of anything James might consider offensive to his wife.

Marlene cheers up when they go shopping at a muggle store and they pick funny glasses, with pictures on them.

She finds an ashtray- made of tin, but in the shape of a bike, and they buy several of those.

Well, she buys everything, because Sirius really isn't doing great with money. He needs to talk to Bella.

Whatever gold he has left, he's keeping it to buy Marlene a fancy necklace for her twenty-fourth birthday.

"Maybe you should buy her a ring, instead." James winked at him, when they made plans for a surprise party for Marlene.

Marlene gets some bedcovers, too, imprinted with odd patterns. And then she gets herself several skimpy muggle outfits.

They have so much fun as she tries them on that an embarrassed worker asks them to leave the shop, insisting Sirius shouldn't be in the changing cabin with her.

Sirius has a good day, all in all. The Potters and Peter come by in the afternoon, and everything goes great, until they start eating.

A flash of his dinners with Voldemort- because he ate with him twice now- takes him by surprise. *Voldemort cooks better than Marlene and Lily*. The thought comes, unbidden, and he is helpless to resist it.

Sirius grips his fork until he almost bends it. *Can't I have a single day without thinking of him? Is that too much to ask?*

He banishes Voldemort from his head, focuses on Marlene and his friends, but his mood is already ruined, an itch under his skin that he can't quite scratch.

(-)

"I don't want you to spend the gold on that whore," Bella spits, eyes narrowed.

There's a heavy bag of coins between them, on the coffee table.

Sirius bristles. He stands. "You didn't say your help comes with conditions."

He moves to leave, but she's right behind him, grabbing his hand.

"Sirius-"

"It's fine," he snaps at her. "Worry not," he adds, just to piss her off. "I won't starve or anything. *Marlene* will make sure to feed me."

Bella cuts him off, a hand on his chest, eyes sparkling. "Do you love her?" she asks, gaze intense. "Do you truly love her?"

"Oh, piss off!" he snarls, but she refuses to move aside.

"Answer me!"

He rolls his eyes.

"You don't love her," she declares, carefully searching his face. "If you did, you'd have married her."

"Perhaps I'm planning to," he spits, annoyed.

Her left eye twitches. “She’s nothing,” she mutters, more to herself than to Sirius. “Just a thing to amuse you, to pass the time. You can’t truly mean to give her our noble name-”

"*My* noble name,” he says, squeezing her wrist, removing her palm from his chest. “You no longer bear it, love. You’re a Lestrange, and I didn’t interrogate you about him when you agreed to marry -”

A chocked up laugher. “You *cried* and asked me to stay home! You threw at least one tantrum a day and you begged your father to let you marry me, instead.”

“I was *twelve*,” he points out. He forgot how dramatic he’d been about the entire thing. Sirius didn’t want to let her go. It felt like he was losing a mother, the only one in the family to hold him gently, to tell him he’s perfect as he is. She was his cousin, his sister, his best friend, his protector, his mentor, the one that taught him illegal curses, that showed him how to sneak out of the house, the one that taught him how to kiss- she was *everything*, and he despaired at the thought that she’ll marry and she won’t be his anymore. He calmed down slightly when she married, yet she’d still visit him often, or she’d take him for a weekend to Lestrange Manor, where he was still allowed to sneak into her bedroom at night and curl at her side to find sleep. “You’re not a child, you have your husband, so stay out of my fucking business.”

She grabs his jaw. “Your business is my business,” she hisses at him, nails digging harshly into his skin. “Never forget that! I was in your mother’s room when she gave birth to you. I was one of the first to hold you! I fucking raised you, and then I had to watch you abandon us all- but you came back, and I won’t allow you to ever turn your back to me again! Now, answer me! Is Marlene McKinnon the one? When you close your eyes and imagine the future, is she there? Do you want her to bear your children, to grow old at your side?”

“What the fuck has gotten into you?” He draws his head back. “You’re crazier than usual today, cousin.”

“Answer me!” she demands.

“Will you let me go? Merlin!” He pushes her off him, as gently as he can.

Finally, he manages to remove her from his path, and he makes his way to the door.

(-)

Voldemort is wearing Sirius’ watch; the one Sirius mockingly threw at him that night with the Horcrux debacle, sneering at him to buy better chairs.

Sirius observes this in a duel, when Voldemort allows the sleeve of his robe to slide down a bit.

He stares.

Now, why is this turning me on? It's just a fucking watch.

Yet the idea that it's Sirius', and Voldemort is wearing it…

It means nothing- he tries to tell himself it means absolutely nothing. Voldemort is just a thief, he enjoys taking Sirius' stuff. His food, his coffee, his drinks, his fags, and now his watch.

It frustrates Sirius. He isn't sure why, and in which way, but he's *frustrated*.

He's always frustrated these days. It's more prevalent when he's around Voldemort, but it's seeping into the rest of his life.

A mounting restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction contaminating everything he does.

He's so bothered by the silver band snug on that slender wrist- slender, but strong, bones and tendons peeking through snow white flesh- that he can't focus at all on the duel, ends up on his back much sooner than usual.

They don't duel at the old cabin anymore. Now it's always beside Voldemort's house, near the torture barn.

Sirius referred to it as such so many times, that eventually Voldemort slipped and called it the 'torture barn', too. When Sirius laughed at him, Voldemort seemed torn between wanting to strangle Sirius or smiling at him.

He suspects the relocation of the duels has something to do with Voldemort's insistence on feeding Sirius after they're done.

That's frustrating, too. Having Voldemort so close, in a small space, involved in such a domestic activity. It's different when they duel- Sirius can keep in mind this is the dark lord, a ruthless murderer with no regard for human life.

But in that thrice damned kitchen, the lines blur, and he's still Voldemort, he's still surrounded by the power and menace and *magic* that so attract Sirius, only he's something else, too.

With each encounter, the tension tightens in Sirius' chest, arousal burns hot, low in his abdomen.

Voldemort refuses to give the watch back, when Sirius asks over their third dinner.

"No," he says simply, cutting his steak.

"What do you mean, 'no'? It's mine!"

"Not anymore," Voldemort says, lifting the fork to his mouth. But then, before he eats it, he tilts his head, looking at Sirius pensively. "I know you're poor now, however. If you can't afford another, I'll get you a new one."

That would make anything worse. Sirius almost shivers, just imagining himself wearing-

He lets the subject drop and turns his attention to his plate, stabbing his own steak with unnecessary force.

(-)

Thankfully, he doesn't think of Voldemort when he's having sex with Marlene. He doesn't know if it's because it would be a betrayal of such epic proportions that even his mind shies away from it, or if it's simply because Marlene and Voldemort have absolutely nothing in common.

In a way, it feels as if lately Sirius is having sex with her just to avoid thinking about Voldemort for however long it lasts.

But, as soon as it's over, he's right back to obsessing over Voldemort. He finds no peace in his dreams- those are the worst.

How did he go from having nightmares about Voldemort killing him, or his friends, to now having very different type of dreams? There wasn't even a grace period between the two.

Does he dream of me? Sirius wonders, come still drying on his stomach. *Does he wake up hard?*

Just that idea provokes his cock into twitching again.

He growls in frustration.

Is Voldemort as prone to obsession as Sirius?

He can't be. He's old and collected, not an impulsive brat like I am.

His house is a testament that Voldemort isn't the type to indulge in useless comforts. He's measured, and-

He's patient, it occurs to Sirius. *He's waiting me out.* Voldemort learned how to wait for things he wants, by necessity if nothing else.

Sirius is all about immediate satisfaction. When they were young and a relative or another brought them sweets from abroad, Sirius would eat his share in one sitting. Regulus would take a bite and save the rest for later, to 'last him longer'. Sirius could never understand this type of restraint. So he'd steal Regulus' sweets and eat those, too.

I can't give in, Sirius tells himself.

(-)

He's in one of those special muggle pubs. Drunk, of course. Only this time he got drunk with the *intent* to visit, unlike the previous times where he took that impulsive decision while already drunk.

Maybe it will bring some sort of relief if he can play out the fantasy. Take the edge off.

He picks a tall, dark-haired man. Distantly, he realises he always picks tall, dark-haired men.

Even before he met Voldemort.

He really doesn't want to question why that is, so he pushes it out of his mind as he stalks to his target. It doesn't take long before he's dragging him to the bathroom. But once safely hidden in a stall, he forgets to build a fantasy.

He gets distracted by the heat of another man so close to him, still something so excitingly new to him. Mixed with shame and apprehension, of course, with the thought that there's something wrong with him to want it so much.

He shivers when long, strong fingers wrap around his prick. He wants to focus on it, to properly enjoy it, to savour it, but then he's equally driven mad with the feeling of a cock that isn't his in his hand. He wants to savour that, too, and he doesn't know what to focus on first.

Whispers of how handsome he is, what a perfect cock he has break through his drunken, lustful haze. It means nothing to him, almost boring. Everyone says that- men, women, even some creatures always comment on Sirius' looks. His mum used to say he's handsome, one of the few qualities even she couldn't deny him.

Is that why Voldemort wants me? Because I'm handsome? That would be disappointing. Especially because Sirius doesn't want him because of his looks. Sirius lusts over him because he's…*him*.

No, he reassures himself. It can't be that. If Voldemort only wants handsome, he has plenty of options.

Maybe he doesn't even like me. It could be a game, a manipulation, a ploy to -

He can't think about that. He thinks about it too often, plagues his mind in the middle of the night, not letting him rest.

His experiment fails. Sure, he comes, and that's always good, but he can't play out a fantasy, he can't imagine Voldemort in the bloke's place.

It doesn't take the edge off. In fact, it only makes it *worse*.

(-)

He can feel Moody's eyes on him.

Wrath simmers below the surface of Sirius' skin, poisoning his thoughts. He feels the rage in the back of his throat, on his tongue, ready to lash out.

Sirius breathes as quietly as he's able and does not meet Moody's gaze.

Because if he does, he isn't sure what he'd do.

An old scar burns below his elbow. A small thing, from when he was twelve and he and Evan pestered Lucius so much, that they'd finally annoyed him enough to duel them.

Lucius made short work of them, freshly out of Hogwarts with Outstanding on all his N.E.W.T.S.

The scar burns and he can see Evan as a child, how fierce he'd been, even as young as that. How he and Sirius laughed, even when they were put down, bruised and bloodied. How they laughed even harder when Abraxas Malfoy caught wind of the fact his son just attacked the heirs to such powerful families. The mischief in Evan's eyes when he and Sirius denied that they begged Lucius for it.

He can see a piece of Moody's nose is missing, along with a chunk of his cheek.

Wilkes surrendered when they were surrounded by Aurors. Evan chose to fight, buying time for another two Death Eaters to make their escape.

They say that, for a handful of seconds, Evan fought five Aurors on his own.

Sirius feels a fierce pride, mixed with sorrow, tainted by blinding rage.

"Death before dishonour," Evan had yelled, laughed when Lucius barked at them to put down their wands, a threatening look about him.

Sirius tries to stop thinking about him, to focus on Dumbledore's words, on James' presence at his side.

But he cannot.

There was no honour in what Evan was doing, a dying part of him tries to argue. *He chose war and terror.*

But it's of no use. The rage doesn't abate.

And Moody keeps staring at him. He's not the only one. Sirius feels their judging eyes. Ever since he'd made that comment about Moody killing a boy, ever since he alone from the Order

did not attend the many funerals in the past week, he can feel how tense people grow around him.

He clings to Dumbledore, going on about alliances that need to be secured with wayward werewolves that aren't yet apart of Greyback's pack.

Yet Mrs Evan's scream rings in his head.

Bella struggling in his arms-

He looks up, meeting Moody's gaze.

I will be glad when you're dead, Sirius thinks, hands curled around his chair, to stop himself from lunging over the table.

Moody glares back, half made of wood, ravaged body sustained by magic. He isn't intimidated by Sirius' ire, unlike most people that find themselves at the end of the 'Black stare' as James calls it.

Instead, Moody's magical eye zooms on Sirius's left hand. He won't be able to see the mark, but he knows it's there. Moody always had sharp instincts.

(-)

Sirius laughs when Marlene asks if he wants to come with her to her father's birthday party.

"As if I wish to spend time around your brother."

Her face hardens. "Why? What has my brother done to you?"

"He's an-" Sirius stops himself short from saying Auror. "He's a twat."

She gets in his face, red rising high on her cheeks. "As opposed to your dear brother? Now that's one fine upstanding gentleman-"

"Careful," he hisses, grabbing her hair.

She laughs in his face, a broken sound. "I always take care not to insult your horrid family, but since you won't offer me the same respect, then-"

"Careful," he warns again, tightening his grip.

"Or what?" she demands and her wand comes between them, even if the space is tight. The tip of it digs into the flesh of his neck. "When I first brought you home, my mother warned me of you," she says, quietly. "Not because you're a drunk, or that you're violent, or because you were steadily fucking your way through our population. She just told me *'he's a Black'*."

She stares up at him, eyes sparkling. “And I laughed. I told her you’re not like the other Blacks. I told her to stop being judgemental - she left her family, too, I reminded her. She left because they were disgusting blood purists that wanted to engage her with a man she didn’t want. But she said her family is not like yours. She said no one’s family is like yours. She warned me your blood runs thick, and it is rotten.”

He pulls her hair tighter, looms over her. Her wand grows hot against his skin.

“Your mother,” he says, slowly, anger bubbling up in his chest. “Is a cunt.”

It’s the worst fight they had so far. Insults fly between them, hurtful, nasty things.

They go low, both of them, picking at what they know would most pain the other.

Sirius is sorry *while* he is saying some of those things to her, but he can’t stop. She can’t stop either.

She’s the first to cast a curse, though he goaded her into it.

He knows this isn’t at all healthy, that it isn’t the first time they raise a wand to each other, and it won’t be the last. He knows most couples don’t do that.

They used to be equally matched, a year before, but Sirius surpassed her after all those private lessons from the most accomplished dark lord in existence.

He doesn’t use his advantage- or rather, he doesn’t use it to physically hurt her. He deflects anything she cats his way, and mocks her about it.

It’s horrible.

“You need to pull out! Tell Dumbledore you can’t do it anymore!” she screams at the end, eyes wet with tears, mouth twisted with anger. “You need to get away from Voldemort and those people! You’re changing, Sirius! You were always fucked up, but lately you’re -”

“I thought I am *rotten,* either way, no matter what company I keep. Isn’t that what dear mummy told you? That my blood is rotten? How fucking dare she talk about my family, the disgusting blood-traitor?!”

“You’re beyond help!” she yells at him.

“*Help*? Who the fuck asked you to help me?”

After she leaves, taking some of her clothes with her, Sirius tries to decide this is for good. That when she’ll come back for the rest of her stuff, he’ll let her go. Or that he’ll pack her belongings himself and just ask Peter to drop them off.

It’s best this way. She deserves better than him, and he deserves someone that doesn’t call his family ‘rotten’.

He wants his independence back, too. He always wanted it, he was never fully happy when she moved in with him.

She's the last barrier between you and Voldemort, something whispers in his head. *If you don't have her as a pretext to hide behind, you'll give in.*

He goes for a long ride on his bike, trying to clear his head, to make a choice and stick by it, but he doesn't decide on anything by the time he's back.

(-)

"Do you fight with Lily?" Sirius asks James the next day, over a pint of beer.

"Sometimes," James answers. "I'm *spoiled* and *immature*-" he says, rolling his eyes, quoting Lily, no doubt. "And sometimes she can be a little condescending."

Just a little? Sirius thinks sarcastically, but keeps it for himself.

"Everyone fights once in a while. Marlene?"

"Yeah."

"You're both proud arseholes," James offers. "It's a miracle you can stand each other, but really, that's saying something. You were meant for each other."

"She deserves better," Peter says, quietly.

"Pete!" James elbows him in the ribs. "Anyone should be so lucky to have Padfoot!"

Peter shrugs. "If I were a woman, I'd run far, far away from you, Sirius. You're the best mate a bloke can wish for, but I can't imagine a worse boyfriend."

"Oh, shut up!" James says, a bit too sternly.

Sirius doesn't say anything. Peter's right. Besides, Peter is the one Sirius went to, slept on his couch, after having his prick sucked by muggle men in secret bars, smelling of booze and sex and with bite marks on his neck.

(-)

"What are you doing here?" Sirius asks, suspicious, when he opens the door to find Rabastan on the other side.

Sirius was just getting ready to head out. Marlene hasn't returned home after their fight, and he doesn't expect her to do it that night. She's at his father's birthday party.

Sirius' blood boils just remembering the argument.

"What a warm welcome," Rabastan says, one eyebrow lifted. "Aren't we friends? Family, even?"

"We were friends," Sirius say, a little thrown back.

Rabastan enters, shoving past him.

"We *are*," he says. "You're in my house practically every week."

"Bella insists to feed me there."

Rabastan sighs. "Yes. She insists on many things. You at least get to leave. I have to live with those two psychopaths. I need a break."

Sirius closes the door. He crosses his arms, narrows his eyes at Rabastan.

"I understand the need to get away, but surely I am not the only choice to-"

"You're the most entertaining one," Rabastan argues. "And you understand what it's like to live with a bloody Black. Plus, you're the only one that will dare shit talk Rodolphus. No one else would. I just want to rant for a bit."

"Well, I am always up to trashing Rodolphus, that's true."

Sirius brings some shots and a bottle of muggle vodka, just to see Rabastan's reaction.

But Rabastan is familiar with it. He would be. He and Sirius once ran away from a party held by a family member in Barcelona, and went to hide in muggle London, going from pub to pub and trying different beverages.

Back then, Rabastan wasn't as rabid in his muggle hating ways.

They invent a game. They go down the alphabet and find a word to describe Rodolphus for every letter.

Abusive. Bully. Cold. Demanding. Erratic. Fucker. The more they drink, the sillier it gets.

"Rumour is you actually fucked at least one muggle," Rabastan says, when they run out of words to insult Rodolphus. "Did you?"

"Yeah."

Rabastan leans in closer. "And how is it?"

"Fucking hells, mate. Cunts are cunts, no matter who they belong to."

Rabastan looks disappointed. Merlin knows what he'd imagined sex with a muggle might be like.

"Evy got engaged," he says, after more drinks.

"Macnair?" Sirius laughs. "With who?"

"With an idiot from a new family. They just moved to England from Australia. Can't be more than three generation pure. But they're rich. Almost Lucius type rich. The Macnairs are broke-"

"They've been broke for at least a generation," Sirius says.

"Yeah. But their name is worth more than any gold. So these peasants will take Evy, rebellious as she is, to get inside our circles, and Macnair will take their money."

"Evy must like him if she agreed to it. You know her, she won't put up with -"

"Her father begged her. They're doing really poorly. So poorly Walden had to get a job. As a Ministry executioner."

"No!" Sirius exclaims, with glee. "That's hilarious!"

"So Evy said she'll save her brother from such a cruel fate and agreed to marry this Paul lad."

"She's a soldier, that girl."

"She is." Rabastan bites his cheek. "I offered to marry her, but Rodolphus didn't want to hear about it."

"Not surprised," Sirius says. "Did we call him a hypocrite earlier? We should have."

"We did," Rabastan snorts, downing another shot. "He married Bella even if she wasn't at all 'proper', but he won't let me marry Evy."

"To be fair, Bella wasn't shagging people left and right at Hogwarts," Sirius points out. "There was only ever Rodolphus for her."

"And you," Rabastan says.

"*What?*" Sirius chokes on his drink. "No."

Rabastan looks shocked. "You never- come on! Not *once*?"

"No."

"Huh." Rabastan shakes his head. "That's surprising."

"I was thirteen when she married," Sirius laughs. "I did wake up once with her in my bed. She had a hangover, had snuck out to meet Rodolphus and then hid in my room when she came back. I woke up hard, you know how it is, nothing to do with her, but she caught on to

it and mocked me mercilessly when I tried to hide it. She called me ‘adorable’. Couldn’t look at her for a week.”

She tried to mock him again, sneaking in his bed in the morning, surprising him, until Sirius wrestled her on the bed and told her he’ll fuck her if she didn’t shut up, and they’ll see who laughs after that.

Tragically, Kreacher heard that part, just then coming in Sirius’s room to wake him up for breakfast.

And then Sirius and Bella were ordered to the office, where their fathers served them such a lengthy lecture, Sirius thought he’d rather die a virgin than go through it again.

After that day, Sirius and Bella weren’t allowed to close the doors to their rooms when they were together. Of course, she found that hilarious.

Rabastan laughs. “She’s a fucking menace, that one.”

“You realise you can marry Evy if you really want to, right? You’re a grown man-”

“He’ll disown me. You know he will.” Rabastan shrugs. “Family is more important than a woman, in any case. Besides, wait until you meet this Paul. He’s a whimpering coward. I’ll fuck her in his own bed and there won’t be anything he can do about it.”

They gossip about several of their acquaintances next, and Sirius remembers that Rabastan truly is a friend. And how easy they can fall back into place, even after the rift between them during the last years.

They talk about Evan, too, and Rabastan’s eyes darken dangerously.

He is a friend, but he isn’t James or Peter or Remus.

Rabastan is a murderer, a cold-blooded one. *He helped kill twenty-eight muggleborns*, Sirius remembers, just then. *Why doesn’t that bother me more? How can I sit here and drink and laugh with him?*

There is an inherent failure, a fatal flaw, within Sirius. A piece that doesn’t function correctly, or is missing entirely. Something people like James or Lily have in abundance. *Decency. That’s what’s missing.*

Rabastan leaves, soon after that, checking his watch. He *hugs* Sirius, before he goes.

“I’m sorry,” he offers, and he looks regretful. Almost pitiful.

“What for?” Sirius asks, frowning.

But Rabastan doesn’t answer, just pats his back and then leaves.

(-)

James shows up just as Sirius is cleaning up the glasses and ashtray. He's trying to become less of a slob, to look after himself and his house. It's not easy, but he makes an effort when he remembers.

Immediately, he knows something is horribly wrong.

The hour is late, to begin with.

And James' eyes are red rimmed.

"What?" Sirius asks, taking out his wand. "James, what's wrong?" he demands, when James doesn't answer right away.

"You need to sit down," James says, and he sniffles. He tries to push Sirius to the couch.

"What happened?" Dread sobers him up instantly.

"Sirius, please. Sit-"

"Tell me!"

James grabs his shoulders. He swallows. "It's the McKinnons," he whispers over a sob. "Marlene."

(-)

She's on the floor beside her sixteen-year-old niece.

Her skin is unnaturally pale, gone from milky white to a bluish hue. Through the straps of the flimsy dress he can see the phoenix tattoo stopped moving, wings folded and still, its head tucked under them.

Her wild hair is covering one of her shoulders, bits of cement stuck into it.

Her wand is still in her hand, fingers with red nails gripping around it.

Her nails, her hair and her lipstick are the only shades of red in the room.

And her shoes. The ones with the spikes on the heels.

She's wearing the dragonhide leather dress.

"*Don't let Gid bury me in one of those flowery, demure dresses he likes. Dress me in my black dragonhide leather dress. I want to look sexy; if they leave my body intact, that is. Promise me; the black leather dress."*

"Fine," he says. "With your red shoes, the ones with the spikes on the heel?"

"You have a good eye for fashion, Black."

He hears a snap when the last bit of his sanity dies; pulled away from him like a thread.

He can hear himself laughing.

Gideon's face, tear strained and desperate appears before him. Sirius is still laughing when Gideon's fist connects with the side of his head, and the laughter finally stops then, as pain explodes behind his eyelids.

He doesn't have the time to react- he doesn't even know how he'd react, his body feels numb, his mind cold- when James is suddenly there, yelling at Gideon.

Many arms are holding Sirius by the shoulders and arms, as though they anticipate he's about to do something.

"How can you laugh, you piece of shit!?" Gideon's voice echos in Sirius' head.

"Gideon, this isn't the moment to-"

Sounds come in and out, distorted. There's silence and then too much noise; there's a buzzing in his ears, and then there's Gideon's heartbreak mixed with James' arguments.

Sirius glances at Marlene, but quickly looks away. Her hair mixes with her nieces' hair. The girl has an expression of terror etched on her frozen face.

In the distance, through a collapsed part of the wall, he can see another pair of feet.

He can see blonde short hair and half a forehead peeking from under blocks of cement. An old hand. Mrs McKinnon, he guesses.

And, down the stairs comes Dawlish carrying something small, covered with a sheet. A very small body.

"No!" Lily cries, stumbles to support herself on the wall. "No, God, no! No!"

Proudfoot comes after Dawlish, cradling Marlene's sister to his chest. Or what's left of her.

Thank Merlin you're dead, Sirius thinks, looking back to Marlene. *This would have broken you.*

Sirius breathes in deeply and he smells it. He smells home and thunderstorms, humid summer nights spent under a clear night sky. A dark, sweet perfume.

Sirius smells *Bella*.

He's walking. The hands around him try to hold him and Sirius takes out his wand.

Yells of pain, loud shrikes.

"Sirius, stop!" James.

“Let him leave,” Crouch orders. “Before I arrest him.”

Sirius steps by a fallen shelf. Pictures are on the floor, their frames broken, glass shattered.

Marlene smiles and waves at him from one of them.

It’s only then that Sirius acknowledges the pain. Like a vice, it’s pressing on his heart, from all sides, squeezing tightly.

Someone is trying to dig Mr. McKinnon remains from under several heavy objects.

On his way out, Sirius hears sobbing.

He peeks inside the kitchen. Moody kneels on the floor, hands on Marlene’s brother’s corpse.

“Sir, you have to let him go,” a younger Auror says, kneeling beside Moody. “We have to secure the area, and…”

“We’ll hit Moody where it most hurts him.”

Moody doesn’t have a family of his own. His Aurors, his team- they are his children.

For a second, Sirius feels a vicious, twisted and vindictive glee at the sight of Moody bawling his eyes out. Immediately, he’s disgusted with himself, Marlene’s face flashing before his eyes.

The garden is filled with Aurors, too, milling about. Their wands are out, pointed up.

The Dark Mark floats above them, casting an eery green light over everything.

Sirius welcomes the sight, lets his eyes feast on it. Because it chases away the grief, dissipates it, replacing it with rage.

(-)

Bella waits for him in the grandest room at Lestrange Manor. She stares at him, head held high, shoulders straight.

There’s a gash on her face, a burn on her sleeve.

She smells of death.

She smells like home and thunders.

“Where is your husband?” he hears himself talking as he gradually advances.

“It was me,” she answers, defiant. “Rodolphus didn’t kill her.”

Oh, Sirius knows.

“He went to report to the dark lord,” she says. “You won’t find him.”

She doesn’t flinch, even as he stalks closer.

She doesn’t take out her wand, and neither does he.

It’s Bella. *Bella,* his mind whispers, horrified.

She killed Marlene, another voice fights back, violent and hurt.

“Do you truly love her? Is she the one?”

So that is why she was asking. And Sirius said nothing. Would Marlene had been spared if Sirius told Bella he loves her? That he’ll marry her?

Would then Bella hesitate to break his heart?

No, something inside him answers.

Sirius reaches her. Slowly, he lays his fingers on the cut on her cheek, thumb going gently over it.

Bella’s eyes never leave his.

And then his fingers travel down, curl around her throat. He brings his other hand to join the first and squeezes.

She doesn’t react.

Harder and harder, he can feel her pulse racing frantically under his hands, blood rushing in her veins.

His blood.

Bella just looks at him.

Her face is blurry, and it must mean Sirius is crying. In the silence he can almost hear the tears dropping on the expensive marble beneath them.

When her lips turn blue, she jerks, a full body flinch and one of her hands comes up, fingers curling around Sirius’ wrist, but she forces it down before it can try to pry at Sirius’ hands.

She refuses to fight back.

Sirius knows Marlene fought back. He can imagine the anguish she felt. She was close to the door, with her niece. He thinks she already knew the battle was lost, her family dead or dying and she was just trying hopelessly to save the one she had beside her.

A sob wretches itself out of his chest, shattering the silence.

Sirius desperately wants comfort and Bella was always his comfort, she could always, invariably make thing better, no matter how dire the situation was.

But now she can't. She *caused* this pain.

She looks at him, lips parted in an urgent need for air that won't come, but she doesn't fight.

With a snarl, Sirius lets go. He pushes her to the floor.

She coughs violently, curled around herself, wheezing.

Sirius is upon her in a second, pinning her on her back. He grabs her chin and seeks her eyes again.

She is a superb Occlumenes; she was the one that taught him the skill, but she doesn't resit the intrusion.

She lets him in.

"The perfect opportunity," Dolohov says, from Lucius' side. "My lord, the McKinnon patriarch is having a birthday next week. They will all gather to celebrate him."

It is perfect. They have waited long enough for sweet revenge. ***We bid our time, and now we can act,*** *Bella thinks.*

"They are an old family," her lord says, after a short pause. "A pureblood line."

"Traitors," Bella hisses.

"Still," Yaxley cuts over her. "An ancient name, Bella. We should take down the Auror, the patriarch as well, but to wipe them all out-"

Bella glares at him. He looks away.

"They are a continuous, mounting threat to anything purebloods value," Dolohov argues. "One brother is an Auror, one sister an apprentice under Dumbledore, the other fighting with the stupid order."

"I agree," Yaxley says. "But-"

"Enough."

They all settle when their lord speaks. They turn to him.

"I understand the Rosier name died with Evan. I sympathise with the sorrow it brings to some of you. An eye for an eye. Yet I will not have you kill children. Slaughtering young ones will cost us the support of the families that have yet to declare for a side. The McKinnon boy, nine or ten years old? You shall spare him."

Yaxley breathes in relief. Lucius' relief is less evident, but Bella knows him well, notices his jaws unclenching.

Bella wants the McKinnons wiped out, as the filthy Auror wiped out the Rosier name. But she supposes she can make an exception for a child as young as that.

"The girl," Yaxley says. "There's another child- still a student-"

"She's not a child," Rodolphus says. "She's sixteen."

Silence falls again, as they await their lord's judgment.

"She'll turn seventeen soon enough," he decides. "We already killed her father, and now the rest of her family will follow. It's logical to assume she will join Dumbledore as soon as she's of age. Matters not if she dies now, or in a year's time."

Lucius looks away. He always had a weak stomach, that one.

"The youngest sister," her lord speaks again. "Marlene. Let her live."

"What?" she snaps. Surely, she must have heard wrong. Her lord's mesmerising eyes settle on Bella's. "She's just as much of a threat to us as her stupid brother!"

He knows! He always encouraged them to kill the whore. But that was before.

Before he must have learned Sirius has a thing with the cunt. Had Sirius asked for her life to be spared?

"Leave us."

Chairs scrape the floor as the others stand, bow and hurry to the door.

Rodolphus stays beside her, however.

"She has to die," Bella insists when the door closes behind Rabastan. "She's an efficient fighter," she spits, though she hates to admit it.

The dark lord says nothing for some seconds.

He doesn't like being questioned.

"And how do you imagine your cousin will react if we kill his lover?"

She bites her lip. "Sirius will get over it," she says, after a second of consideration. "He'll yell, he'll drink himself into a stupor and then he'll forget all about her. He doesn't love her! I asked him!"

"You will leave her be."

"No, that's-"

“That is my last word. Tell me you understand.”

His eyes are rarely harsh when he looks at her, but they are now.

“Fine,” she spits. “As you say.”

But something must show on her face, or he simply knows her too well-

“Bella,” he says, full of warning.

“It will be as you command, my lord.” She meets his eyes.

It’s not like he can get inside her head. He could, she imagines, but to achieve that, he’ll have to break her mind beyond a point from which she would be able to come back.

He won’t be doing that, she’s certain.

“You won’t go along for this mission.”

Bella’s ire ignites like fire inside her. She opens her mouth, but Rodolphus squeezes her leg under the table.

“Evan was my cousin,” she says, slowly, trying to maintain a respectful tone.

“Rowle will go for Auror Burton that same night. Burton was present when Evan died. He is part of Moody’s team. You may lead that mission. Get your revenge.”

Marlene McKinnon has to die; her lord knows it, and he’d gladly order it if it weren’t for Sirius.

Bella knows Sirius better. He knows he won’t abandon Bella and the dark lord over a skirt.

“Very well,” she says, and bows her head.

“Good. Call the others back inside.”

Bella stands, walks to the door, trying to keep her temper at bay. Her lord is wise, but she knows Sirius better than he does. She knows what needs to be done.

“Keep an eye on her,” she hears him order Rodolphus when she gets out of the room.

“I will, my lord.”

“And you have to make sure Sirius won’t be with the McKinnons that night. Send your brother to distract him.”

(-)

“Deal with Burton,” Bella orders, grabbing Rowle’s huge forearm. “Swiftly. You have command.”

"You're not coming?" he asks, mask in place, as he looks over to the corner of the room where the rest of their team is.

"No. I have something to do." Rodolphus already left with his team. She needs to make haste. "I trust you to manage this, Rowle. Don't fuck up, or I'll fuck you up."

He laughs. "Wouldn't dream of disappointing you."

She hurries outside the Manor and Apparates to the McKinnon house.

Bright curses shine from inside, through shattered windows.

She takes out her wand and heads inside. She almost stumbles over the corpse of the old man.

There's a hole in the ceiling already. She can see Dolohov taking cover upstairs, half hidden under a table.

"Fuck!" Dolohov swears, as a swarm of curses come his way. He looks towards Rodolphus. "It was an accident! I didn't mean to-"

The child is dead. An accident or not, he's still dead. Bella sees his tiny frame broken atop the stairs, impaled by a shard of glass.

The dark lord won't be pleased. Bella is almost happy- at least she won't be the only one to have angered him, when the news reaches him.

She sees a flash of red hair coming out of a room on the ground floor. The whore, dragging a younger girl after her.

"Let them go," Rodolphus shouts from above.

Yaxley obeys, heading to another room, ignoring the fleeing women.

Bella darts after them, unnoticed by either sides.

She barely catches on with them. The cunt was almost out the door, her niece in tow.

"Not so fast," Bella says, spelling the lock shut.

The whore tuns on her heels, pushing the girl behind her.

Bella can see what Sirius finds in this otherwise unremarkable woman.

The fire in her eyes, her proud shoulders.

She must remind him of me. *A cheaper, uglier imitation, to be sure, but an imitation none the less.*

A good fighter, and Bella knows a fight is coming. She takes off her mask, lowers her hood, so her hair comes loose around her shoulders.

McKinnon's face falls with shock. Her hand shakes as she lifts her wand, eyes scanning Bella's features. Features that are so alike Sirius'.

"He will never forgive you for this," Marlene McKinnon says.

"He'll forgive me anything," Bellatrix assures her and aims her wand.

"I won't," Sirius says, chocked, withdrawing from her head before he can see Marlene in pain or feel Bella's glee at her death. "I will never forgive you. You hurt me."

"You hurt me, too," she chokes out, massaging her throat. "You abandoned me for the likes of McKinnon. Her brother killed my cousin!"

His tears land on her face, mixing with the blood.

For a moment, he wishes he could kill her, but he knows he can't. "You are not my cousin," he tells her. "You are not my kin. From this moment on, you are *dead* to me."

He gets off her and walks away. She calls his name, but he ignores her.

(-)

He turns into Padfoot. The pain diminishes that way, instantly. He walks away from Lestrange Manor, aimlessly, trying to get lost in the scent of the earth, begging his enhanced hearing to drown his thoughts. He walks and walks, and walks.

Night turns to day at some point; birds chirp as the forest awakens.

Eventually, the trees grow sparser, the fresh smell of grass gets muddled, and the birds are replaced by roaring engines. The pavement is hot under his paws, vibrates minutes before a car passes him by.

Some muggles stop and try to catch him, at first luring him with food, whispered worries about the 'poor dog, he must be lost'. When that doesn't work, they try to touch him. Sirius bites the man, puts him on the ground and snarls at him, baring his teeth inches away from a terrified face.

He has the urge to sink his teeth into the vein that he can see bulging under the jaw. He can hear the blood pumping through it.

Sirius wants to hurt someone, wants to kill, to punish-

Red hair gets in his face, skinny arms try to pry him off- the man's partner.

Sirius backs off, goes on his way, licking blood off his muzzle.

He spends a lot of time pondering on the fact that Marlene didn't bleed. That she looked asleep. As if they went drinking, and came home and she passed out in the hallway.

"You have to make sure Gideon won't dress me in one of those stupid robes, Sirius. You promised!"

Will they burry her today? Who would even organise it? All her family is gone.

Sirius barks, keeps walking.

More muggles try to stop him the closer to London he gets. At some point, men in uniform chase him. He evades them easily.

It's night again, and Sirius collapses, his limbs shanking, his muscles aching.

He crawls under a car, but he can't fall asleep. He stares ahead, as raindrops hit the pavement.

James' Patronus floats up to him at some point, but he ignore it and whatever comes out of its mouth.

He thinks Peter sent a Patronus, too, but no- it's just a regular rat, taking cover from the rain. Sirius crawls closer to it, wanting to snuggle against someone, to get some warmth, some comfort, but it flees from him, terrified.

Eventually, instinct alone drives him out, and he finds himself lapping out of a puddle, with no recollection of how he got there. The rain settled into a slow drizzle and he starts walking again.

The sky lightens slightly when he reaches the heavy iron gates. He bites his left paw until it bleeds- not that he should have bothered; he notices it only after the bite. He was already bleeding. Probably stepped in something sharp. Or it was those metal wires the muggles tried to leash him with? Regardless, he swipes his bloody paw onto the iron gate, and it opens for him.

The gargoyles that flank the gates watch him closely as he passes through.

"Here lie the Sacred Ones," a golden sign announces.

He wonders, briefly, if they'll bring Marlene's mum there, where she belongs, in the Fawley plot, towards the end of the cemetery, of if they'll bury her with her son and daughters.

He goes left, through perfectly painted rose bushes.

"The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, the first of the Sacred Families," another plaque announces.

He trots through gravestones of aunts and uncles, grandmothers and great cousins.

He stops for a second at a stone he doesn't remember ever seeing before-

Alphard Black. 1926-1979.

There's no epitaph, just the Hydra constellation, with the giant Alphard depicted in a brighter blue than the rest of the stars.

He keeps going, passing over many star adorned headstones.

He stops when he reaches the statues. The ones that guard the graves of former heads of House.

Sirius looks up at his namesake, remembering the day they buried his great grandfather. Sirius was only five years old. His parents made him walk behind the coffin, all the way from Grimmauld to the cemetery.

"You have to be good today, Sirius. Grandfather is going on the great journey, and we have to see him off. I won't be able to hold your hand. You'll have to walk behind your father and you'll have to be silent."

So Sirius walked for miles, staring at his father ahead of him, at his grandfather that walked ahead of both of them.

He was scared and sore, lower back and feet hurting, his heavy robes stifling in full summer. He kept looking back, to see his mother walking beside a score of relatives, Regulus in her arms.

'You can do it,' her eyes seemed to tell him, and he forced himself to keep going.

Whoever made the statue flattered his great grandfather. They put a wand in his hand, instead of a bottle of firewhsikey, the way Sirius remembers him when he was alive. They made him young, too. Face made of bronze like that, Sirius doesn't recognise him as the great grandfather that would hold him on his knee and tell him stories. But he recognises some of his features, anyway. They are present on all the other statues.

The epitaph is long, all his titles and accomplishments listed in order. And at the end, a personal quote.

"You, that passes by- one day, you will be where I am."

Sirius remembers his father laughing when grandfather Arcturus opened his own father's will and saw the demand for what to write on the headstone.

"Just like him, the bastard! Even in death, he wants to make sure he causes discomfort to those still living. Orion, what's wrong with you?"

But his father just laughed, head in his hands. Sirius was laughing, too, though he didn't know what was funny. It was just nice to hear his father laughing.

"He hasn't slept in two days," his mother offered as an excuse, a hand on his father's back. *"He's simply tired."*

Sirius transforms back into a man. He's naked, his robes torn off him when he transformed, but he figures if there was someone not to mind it, it would be his great grandfather.

There are flowers all over his grave. All the headstones are adorned with flowers. Kreacher goes every Sunday to take care of their plot in the cemetery.

It's obvious who were his favourite Blacks, because those have more flowers than the rest, but he takes care of all of them.

Sirius waves a hand over a leaf, transforming it into a robe. He puts it on and then steals a flower.

"Sorry, great grandfather, you don't mind, do you?"

No answer.

"Next time I come, I'll bring you some whiskey," Sirius promises.

Sirius puts his plush dog in his great grandfather's casket. "So he can have some company," he explains to his father, who's holding Sirius up.

His father kisses his head, then hides the plush dog under a sack of gold someone put there.

"Won't you give him something, daddy?"

Everyone left things in the casket, so the man can take them with him on the great journey to the stars. The wand is between his great grandfather's hands, on his chest. He has his watch, he has gold, he has his favourite pillow under his head. A picture of his wife, who passed before Sirius was born. There's a racing broom there, too.

His father lifts the broom a little, and Sirius sees a bottle hidden underneath.

"I gave him something to quench his thirst."

"Orion!" his mother admonishes from their side, but she's trying to hide a smile.

"We can't laugh at the funeral," his mother explains. "Grandfather was very, very old, so it's not sad to send him off. But we can't laugh in public. You can't cry, either. You can't complain. You can't hold your father's hand. Just walk behind him, then stand beside him when they lower the casket into the ground, yes? You have to be strong."

Sirius still felt like crying when they buried him. He knew it wasn't a sad event, but he felt sad, anyway.

Steeling himself, Sirius walks past his great grandfather's statue.

He sees his father's.

They carved him as a younger man, too, but he is still the man Sirius remembers. Even the wand he holds is replicated perfectly in bronze, every detail accurate, down to the slight curb

his wand had.

Clearly, one of Kreacher's favourites. His headstone is surrounded with flowers, arranged carefully around it.

His father was named after a constellation, so all the stars in Orion are coloured a bright blue-grey. But, he notices, a knot in his throat, Sirius is brighter than the rest.

The words underneath it blur together, his titles mixing with each other-

The only words Sirius sees clearly- 'beloved father'.

Sirius floats the rose he stole onto his father's grave. He gently grabs his father's bronze hand. It's almost as cold as it was when he was alive. And just as grounding.

The ring is there, too. All the statues wear the ring they had worn in life, passed down from the first Black onward.

Sirius' fingers go over it.

He feels awful. He doesn't think it's because he's tired, because he walked for miles and miles. He wants to cry. He knows it will make him feel better.

But he can't.

He kneels, shivering and dizzy, feeling as if he's at the edge of a precipice. He can't breathe, he's choking. He can't even think.

It is like falling from a broom, like directing his bike to fall free from high above, with no control. That pull at his stomach.

He hyperventilates, kneeling and bent over, fingers curled into the earth, until the first tears fall off his cheeks.

In no time at all, he's sobbing, which doesn't help with his breathing.

He wasn't there to put anything in his father's casket; he didn't walk behind him, nor stood at his brother's side when they lowered their father into the ground.

But he's there now, and his tears wet the earth. Nothing more valuable and rare than Black tears.

And it is acceptable to cry with his father.

"You come to me when you are hurt," his father told him, after he gently explained Sirius can't cry around other people, that no one is allowed to see him vulnerable.

He's bleeding, still. His hand is blurry through his tears, but he sees the injuries and the blood, mixing with grass and tears and dirt.

He also sees himself from above. He sees himself kneeling at his father's immortal feet.

The statue and the kneeling figure become smaller and smaller.

The cemetery rapidly becomes a needle in a haystack. Then London becomes a dot.

It's like a hook is pulling him up.

He sees the ocean smashing against an island, all around it. That, too, becomes smaller.

Dizzyingly fast, Europe shrinks, lost in darkness. Darkness all around.

And then blinding light, hundreds of patterns in the distance, patterns he knows well, that are carved into his soul, into his very being, into the headstones of generations of Blacks.

They look different from when he sees them from earth.

He's alone, the silence is deafening. He's Sirius, but no longer Sirius. He feels free, and yet he's trapped.

He's scared. Terrified.

He struggles, though he has no hands, no mouth to scream with, no body.

Help, he thinks. *Father, help me!*

He opens his eyes, and he has eyes again, he's there at his father's grave, but then he's back into a vast darkness, pierced by light here and there.

He can't remember ever being so afraid.

No, no, no. Let me go!

And then he plummets with a speed he can't describe, hot and blazing towards Earth; he's on fire by the time he can see the continent again. England becomes bigger and bigger-

He gasps, blinking, and he's back over his father's grave, staring at his bloody hands.

Shaky breaths wreck his body.

'You cannot wish upon a star,' his father tells him, when he's really young.

'But people do it in stories all the time!'

'You aren't like other people. Your wishes might come true, but you will lose something in the process. You might lose your life. Astral magic is in our bloodline, but the knowledge on how to control it is long lost.'

'Can't I learn? Can't you teach me?'

‘I cannot teach you to control a power that was never granted to me. I cannot guide you to places I never reached. You must simply resist it. Stop coming to the roof to gaze at the stars, Sirius. Or, one day, you’ll get lost in them.’

Sirius collapses on his side, breathing hard.

He’d had something similar happen to him after his father fell sick. Sirius shut himself in his father's room, pushed his bed near the window, so the stars could see them. He drew the Orion constellation in blood on the floor, and he begged the ancient power in his genes to be passed to his father, instead. To cure him.

He’d felt the pull then, too. Felt as if he was flying high, away from everything, while he was still in Grimmauld. Trapped between the two states of being, until uncle Cygnus broke down the door and ripped Sirius away from his father, shook him until Sirius was back in his body.

“Do you want to die, you foolish boy? Have we not told you to never try that?”

It took Sirius weeks to recover, weak and dizzy, stumbling on his feet as if he was just then learning how to walk.

When he stands, he feels weak, but not as weak as he’d been at sixteen. He turns back into Padfoot. That’s better.

Everything is more bearable when he’s Padfoot.

“I’ll come often,” he promises with a bark. *“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here in the beginning.”*

(-)

The door still opens for him, even if he’s opening it with his teeth. The house recognises him, regardless of the fur and paws.

He shuts the door behind him, pushing with his snout until it closes.

Quiet. The noises from outside don’t penetrate the charms put on his home.

Sirius curls on the doormat, puts his head on his front paws and tries not to think of Marlene. If he doesn’t think of it, it makes it easier to pretend it didn’t happen. He knows he’ll have to face it, eventually, but not then.

He’s so busy not thinking about her, using his animal single minded nature to focus on a spider that’s weaving a thread in a corner, that he startles when a soft hand scratches him behind the ear.

“And how did you end up here?” his mother asks, and Sirius turns to snap at her, to tell her to let him be.

When he hears the bark, he realises he's still Padfoot.

She doesn't flinch, doesn't take her hand away. "Be nice," she warns.

Sirius whines, because the memories start coming, fractured and painful. He keeps seeing Marlene' red hair fanned on the floor.

"Kreacher!"

"Yes, Mistress." The elf pops into existence beside them, bowing low.

"Did Sirius come last night? Is he here?"

Kreacher frowns. Sirius growls at him. He lifts himself up, and he's taller than Kreacher, even as a dog.

"Kreacher is-hmm-Kreacher is not sure."

"You're not sure?" his mother snaps at him. "You're really getting too old to do your job."

Kreacher is tied to the house- he must sense Sirius' presence, but not as he usually does. He looks very confused, and then he bows even lower, head touching the ground.

"Kreacher is sorry, Mistress. You should behead Kreacher if this old elf became so useless as not to serve Mistress well."

"Oh, shut up! Go, go! Prepare breakfast!" She turns her attention back to Sirius, and she smiles.

His mother always liked dogs.

"He must have come home," she says to herself. "And he let you in, didn't he? Merlin, the number of dogs that boy brought home. Come along, let's get you some food."

Sirius trots after her. It's so… unreal when she speaks softly to him.

In the kitchen, she gives him a slab of meat on a silver platter, but Sirius isn't hungry. He nudges at her hand, wanting her to love him. To comfort him.

Even when he grew up and they started to hate each other, the urge to fall at her feet and bury his face in her skirts never quite died away.

Love me, love me, you cruel woman.

He whines again.

She pets him, bends so they are at eye level. "You're a big one, aren't you? Beautiful." She runs her hand through his fur.

Receiving praise from his mother does not feel right. His cheek is already stinging in preparation for a slap.

“What in the-” Regulus’ voice comes from the doorway.

Sirius turns and snarls at him, lips pulled back, growling. Why must he always come and steal her attention?

“Was Sirius here?” Regulus asks, wand in his hand.

“Most likely. Shh, be nice!” she holds Sirius by the scruff of his neck, probably to stop him from mauling Regulus.

Not that she could stop him. He can break free anytime he wants, but he wouldn’t really hurt his brother.

“Gods, he looks exactly like Snuffles!” Regulus says, still wary, but eyes wide in disbelief. “Where did he find a dog like Snuffles?”

“How would I know? It’s just like him, isn’t it? To drop a dog on my doorstep without so much as an explanation.”

She raises and goes to help Kreacher around the kitchen, though he is adamant that she is not to touch any actual food.

“Mistress must punish Kreacher, but Kreacher has to say it. Mistress is terrible in the kitchen! Mistress almost burned down the house when she was a young girl. Mistress must stop insisting to interfere!”

“Foul tempered little shit!” she screams at him, but Kreacher doesn’t back down.

“Mistress can brew the water for the tea, if she must do something. Though Kreacher doesn’t trust her even with that,” he mutters, getting the eggs out of the pantry.

“Have you heard from your brother?” she asks, back turned to Regulus and Sirius.

“No.” Regulus looks worried. “He’s not home.”

“You didn’t tell me you know where he lives.”

“I- I asked Rodolphus yesterday,” Regulus lies, cheeks flushed with pink.

A long stretch of silence, interrupted only by Kreacher muttering under his breath that his Mistress is over-boiling the water.

“Is it in London?” she asks, voice empty.

“Dartford.” Regulus bites his lip. “It looks alright. From outside, I mean,” he hurries to add.

Minutes pass again, in complete silence. She seems frozen in front of the stove until Kreacher loses his composure.

“That’s enough Mistress, please, let Kreacher make tea.” He gently tugs at her robe, until she takes a seat at the table, opposite of Regulus.

The chair at the head of the table remains empty.

Sirius goes by his mother, puts his head in her lap. It’s just so nice to be held by her. Dogs can’t cry, but if they could, Sirius would be sobbing.

When the food is ready, Kreacher wants ‘the animal’ out of the kitchen, but his mother lets him stay, even tries to tempt Sirius with pieces of bacon.

“Are you sick?” she asks, when he ignores the food. “Does he look sick to you, Regulus?”

“He looks sad.”

His mother doesn’t eat, either, just picks pieces of bacon out of her plate and tries to feed them to Sirius.

She snatches the Prophet out of Kreacher’ hands when he collects it from the morning owl.

Sirius closes his eyes, buries his snot in his mother’s stomach. He doesn’t want to see anything the papers have to show.

“I’m sure he’s fine, mother,” Regulus says, a while later. “He’s probably drunk somewhere.”

“I don’t care,” she says, flippant.

“*Right.*” He stands. “I’ll go see grandfather; maybe he has news.”

She stands, too, pushing Sirius’ head off her. She kisses Regulus’ cheek. “Have a good day, love.”

Sirius burns with jealousy. She never wished him a good day, nor does she call him love.

But she’s so tender with Padfoot.

Maybe I can live the rest of my life like this. No more war, no more Voldemort, no more complex feelings or responsibilities. He won’t have to deal with Marlene’s death this way. He’d just be a well loved dog, trailing after his mother all day long.

When Regulus disappears from the kitchen and his footsteps fade down the hallway, she turns to the elf.

“Call Narcissa over. Don’t invite her. *Tell* her to come. Right now.”

She heads over to the informal sitting room and sits in Sirius’ father's imposing armchair.

She waits in silence, tense, petting Sirius’ head absentmindedly. He can hear her heartbeat, how fast it is. He can smell her fear.

It makes Padfoot tense, too. A well-honed dog instinct to protect his pack, to demolish any threat.

But there is no threat around.

Narcissa shows up some minutes later. She kisses his mother in that way women do, without actually touching; she sits on the settee and watches Sirius, a tiny frown on her usually frozen face.

“You got a dog, auntie? He looks a bit like Snuffles.”

“Where is Sirius?” his mother asks, directly.

I’m right here, Sirius thinks. *But if you’d know that, if I was in my human form, you’d scorn me and yell at me, and tell me what a disappointment I am.*

“I don’t know-”

“Bellatrix must know. Ask her.”

Narcissa shifts, smoothes some imaginary wrinkles in her robe

“They aren’t talking, from my understanding.”

That shocks his mother. “What? Why?”

“Because of the… incident with the McKinnons.”

“She had something to do with that?” His mother sounds incredibly angry. “That selfish bitch, she can’t let Sirius have anything, can she? Wants him all to herself, as always!”

Narcissa doesn’t answer.

“Sirius wasn’t there, was he? Is he hurt?”

“He wasn’t there,” Narcissa assures her.

“Are you certain?”

“Lucius is.”

“Then where is he? It’s been two days and no one can find him. He wasn’t at the girl’s funeral, or so the Prophet reports.”

Narcissa looks at her lap. “He doesn’t go to funerals, Aunt.”

“He went to Potter’s,” his mother spits, fingers tightening in Sirius’ fur. “Didn’t come to his father’s, doesn’t bother to show up to his fiancee’s, but he was there for those useless, traitorous old sacks of bones.”

“Aunt-”

“Leave me. If you have no information, I wouldn’t want to keep you any longer.”

“He’ll show up. He always does.”

“I don’t care what he does!” she screams.

Wisely, Narcissa nods and takes her leave.

“Kreacher! Bring me a drink!”

The elf shows up with a bottle and a goblet, muttering something about being too early to start drinking. She slaps him over the head and banishes him to the kitchen.

“You better not be his dog,” she says, looking at Sirius sternly. “I hope he’s simply drunk and found you on the streets. I hope you weren’t his, and he decided to leave you here because he doesn’t plan to come back and care for you.”

She’s obviously anxious, and it makes him feel guilty, but it also makes him happy. She cares for him. She’ll never show it, she’ll never say it to him, but she does care.

“He probably named you Snuffles,” she keeps going, drinking the whiskey like its water.

Sirius barks.

She smiles. “I knew it!” She pours herself another goblet. “We were in Scotland on holiday when he went out to play with his cousins. He was four, the most beautiful child that ever walked this earth, but already so stubborn. He came back from the forest with this great beast, two heads taller than him. An old, sickly dog. I told him he can’t keep it, but he wouldn’t accept it. He threw a tantrum until his father caved and allowed the dog to stay. Sirius said it reminded him of our House crest.” She smiles, downing the goblet. “I told him, if that was the case, then we should pick a dignified name for the beast. He chose Snuffles.”

Sirius wags his tail, licks her hand.

“Snuffles only lived for another couple of years. He really was very old.” She sighs. “Sirius never really learned to cope with losing things. He didn’t cry when we found Snuffles dead on Sirius’ bed, where he always slept. *I* cried. But Sirius simply ran off and returned with a stray dog. He named that one Snuffles, too. And the one that came after.”

She sighs, again. She holds Padfoot’s jaw, lifts his head. “But you truly look like the original. A perfect replacement. He always just replaces things. First, it was the damn dog. Then he replaced me with his father’s whores, and then later with that Potter hag. He replaced his brother with James Potter. Bellatrix with this McKinnon girl. He’s probably out there right now, trying to find a new replacement for the poor woman.” She snorts, angry now. The alcohol traveled to her cheeks, colouring them. “But he’ll never replace his father. Oh, no. Not *perfect* Orion. Or, who knows, maybe that’s why he’s trailing after that insufferable mudblood, that *pretender*. Regulus certainly seems to think Riddle reminds him of Orion. As if!” she spits, venom in every word.

She falls silent after that, focused on her drinking.

(-)

Sirius transforms back into a human in his father's room. It's as intact as Sirius'.

Nothing changed since he was last inside it. He needs clothes, and his old ones, back in his room, don't fit him anymore.

His father's clothes are a bit tight, too, which sends shock through his numb body. But they fit well enough.

He thought it would be unbearable to be in that room, where his father wasted away. It isn't. He's just too angry- angry and numb at the same time.

He thinks going to his grave helped, too. Helped lessen his tremendous guilt, if only a little.

His wand must be in Lestrange Manor, where he shifted into Padfoot. He won't be going after it, that's certain. He doesn't want to see Bellatrix, ever again.

He sneaks to the attic, even if there's no need for sneaking. His mother is already drunk down in the sitting room.

He finds a wand that fits him in a trunk where they keep old, spare wands.

It's far thicker than his, and longer, but it will have to do.

When he goes to the cellars, he passes by Kreacher. The elf narrows its eyes at him.

"No good Master," he hisses, forcefully polishing silverware. "Sneaky, dishonest Master."

Sirius curses him, and the scream of pain satisfies the need he has inside him to hurt someone. He goes down to the cellars, finds a place to sit between the many bottles and barrels, and starts drinking in the hope that he'll pass out eventually.

He doesn't, even if he should. He hadn't slept in a long time, he walked for miles, he accidentally stumbled into magic far beyond his skill. But he doesn't pass out.

Thoughts and ideas chase each other in his mind; his last fight with Marlene, the last time they had sex; the last time he saw her smile. Her body, lifeless on the floor. Dawlish carrying her small nephew down the stairs. The dark mark looming above the house.

Sirius lifts his sleeve, to see the same mark on his arm. In his mind, he sees his watch on Voldemort's wrist.

He thinks of Voldemort asking his Death Eater to spare Marlene. He sees Bellatrix' focused faced when she asks Sirius if he really loves Marlene.

“I don’t know,” he answers, now, in the cold, empty cellar, with only mead and wine and whiskey to bear witness. “And now I will never find out.”

He opens the robe, to see his own phoenix tattooed there, a twin to Marlene’s, if much smaller. It moves its wings, turns its head, and Sirius remembers how still Marlene’s phoenix had been, wings folded.

The pain is welcomed when Sirius burns the tattoo away. When he’s done, only bloody tissue is left in its stead.

Turns out, phoenixes don’t rise from the ashes. Marlene didn’t, after all. Sirius looked at her on that floor, and she didn’t rise again.

The wand doesn’t like Sirius, and he’d always been bad at healing spells, but healing burns isn’t that complicated, so he does a fine enough job. Or at least he thinks so. The skin knits itself back together, like a blank canvas.

He points the wand to his dark mark, next, lets it dig hard and deep into his arm.

But he knows he can’t burn this one away. The magic made to bind it to him is far more complex than a normal tattoo. Even if he were to cut the arm from the elbow, he wouldn’t see the mark, yes, but he’s bound to Voldemort anyway, a bit of his magic mixed in Sirius’ very soul.

Fucking Voldemort. Sirius hates him all the more because he ordered his men to let Marlene live. It would be less confusing if he asked for her head.

He’s torn between fury, bitterness and glee that Voldemort’s control over his Death Eaters isn’t absolute.

They wanted revenge for Evan. Sirius knows, somehow he is certain that Voldemort would have been content to just kill Moody and the Aurors that were there the night Evan died.

He doesn’t care about the Rosier name and bloodline, that was snuffed in a second. But his inner circle cares. They demanded retribution and he couldn’t deny it to them.

“Raw power means little with nothing of substance to back it up. He is just one man. One convincing man, I’ll give him that. But he’d be nothing without his followers, without their names and their fortunes.” His grandfather was right.

Rodolphus left Bellatrix behind when he went to report to Voldemort. He must have not wanted her in his presence when Voldemort learned how they veered off the plan.

Is he frustrated? Bellatrix is not a low ranking Death Eater, expandable and without influence. There can’t be consequences for her disobeying him. Voldemort can’t do anything to her, if he doesn’t want to lose Rodolphus. And without Rodolphus, the face of his war, his chief recruiter, he’d lose half his army.

How is he taking out his anger? He’s no Sirius to go crying to his father’s grave or get drunk in his ancestral home.

He hasn't called me. Why? Is he dreading my reaction? He said he can keep Marlene alive, but he failed.

Sirius told him he's on his side, and he lied.

They're both filthy liars.

You started a war that's decimating our world, and you aren't even fully in control of it.

A war for his ego, nothing else.

Because who is Voldemort if there is peace? Who is Voldemort without his army?

Just another half-blood, poor and with no family.

Marlene lost her life in a war without purpose, without a cause. A war with no victors. Nothing will be gained by the end of it, by the time it runs its course.

That's why he doesn't end it. It would be easy for Voldemort to destroy the Ministry. So easy.

But then, what? What need would the purebloods, his own followers, have of him, if he got rid of the Ministry and Dumbledore for them?

How long will it take for Lucius to turn against Voldemort when the Sacred Families rule supreme with no one left to oppose them?

Sure, Voldemort has followers that adore him, but the vast part of his army is in it to gain something. Once they have victory, there is no reason to kneel and bow for a half-blood that can't give them anything else.

"Make Lucius do it. No one loves a plan more than that man."

"I'm sure you must have heard that if you want something done right, you better do it yourself."

"Funny," Sirius says. "Sounds like good advise, and yet I never see you on raids or missions or anything like that."

Voldemort leans back. "Perhaps I don't want things to go well sometimes."

Sirius laughs, remembering it. There's nothing funny, of course. Just rage.

Voldemort is prolonging this war on purpose and he'll do it forever.

He stands, throws away the bottle. It smashes on the floor. Sirius watches the liqueur swirl and gather between cracks before he Apparates.

(-)

Voldemort is seated at his desk when Sirius marches inside his house.

Sirius is all rage and pain, rolling inside him, fuelling his magic. But he freezes, rooted to the spot, when he meets Voldemort's eyes.

The air is thick with tension and magic. It escalates and escalates, the longer they stare at each other, a crescendo of rage so at odd with how still his body is.

Sirius feels it will reach a breaking point, soon enough, feels himself starting to fracture.

"*You*," he snarls. His voice comes out animalistic. Savage.

How can one man cause so much death? Turn friends against each other, break families apart, throw a country into chaos?

Sirius's rage boils, raises under his skin, suffocating.

Voldemort holds his gaze; his eyes are a red sea of calm. Control.

This is how one man can break a world to pieces. It's not his magic, mighty as it is. It's not even his genius. At the core of it, under all that composure, a familiar rage lays dormant, a mate to Sirius's own. Only Voldemort knows how to control it. He might occasionally lose control of his Death Eater, he might snap at them in a fury here and there, but Voldemort is in control of *himself*, unlike Sirius.

The world narrows down to only include him. *Isn't that fucking ironic?* But if Voldemort wants to be everything, to be the centre of the universe, to have everyone take notice of him, he's going to get his wish.

Sirius snaps; the crescendo reached its peak.

Voldemort must see it, sense it, because he stands.

His goal is to hurt. To tear Voldemort apart, break that iron tight composure.

Thus, he should be surprised when he's pushing Voldemort against the wall, crowds his body with his own.

He's not surprised. Voldemort isn't either. Their noses are almost touching. He stares at Sirius expectedly.

Sirius rips open that cursed black robe. Simple and unassuming, unlike the rest of Voldemort. Without it, the difference between them is striking. Sirius is much bigger. He covers all of Voldemort and it pleases a very animalistic part of Sirius, the same one that pleases Padfoot, when he's the largest dog around.

It gives Sirius a sense of power, even if he knows, deep down, it is only an illusion.

Sirius tears his own shirt apart, throws it to the floor with a very practiced move. Voldemort doesn't look away from his eyes. Doesn't move. Stands there, pinned against the wall, submissive.

Sirius is a terrible mix of anger, pain and extreme, sudden arousal. He's not one to check his urges, nor to be bothered by them or overthink them. Yet he'd done that for months now, trying to keep himself in check around Voldemort, to stop himself from getting want he wants.

No more.

He wants Voldemort- he wants to taste all the power and magic and control- and he will have him.

He grabs the back of his neck forcefully, and kisses him.

Voldemort takes a few seconds to respond. He does so carefully. Hesitant, as opposed to Sirius' vicious attack.

It only makes Sirius harder. Finally, he's fucking leading something. Winning. Better.

He takes off Voldemort's shirt, without breaking apart. It could potentially be awkward or hard to accomplish, but Sirius has a lot of experience in getting people naked as he looms over them in crowded places.

Voldemort is uncharacteristically pliant in his arms and it just stokes that fire more.

When he draws his head back, slightly, Voldemort just stares at him, his composure still iron tight. If anything, he looks *smug*. That won't do.

Sirius glances down at his naked torso. Slim, yes. Extremely pale. Covered in scars and runic symbols that move about. He's all a wound under his clothes, marks of a long, harsh life.

He presses another rough kiss to Voldemort's lips, thumbs pressing against the hinge of a sharp jawline to force his mouth open enough for his tongue to slip in without hindrance.

He groans, filled with need and desperation. With anger. Voldemort stays silent.

Sirius grabs his shoulders, roughly turns him and slams him against the wall, face first this time.

He leans into him, puts all his weight on Voldemort, buries his head in the juncture between neck and shoulder. He feels a prominent tendon there, long and taut under Sirius' cheek.

Sirius unbuckles his belt, lowers his trousers, just enough to free his cock, and then he reaches around Voldemort to do the same to him, heart smashing against his ribs so wildly, he's sure Voldemort can feel it in his back.

He never fucked a man, but he's had a woman in all the ways a woman can be had. He knows anal sex is more complicated, he's always careful and patient, when doing it with one of his

conquests.

But Sirius has no clue where his wand is, he's vaguely aware it fell somewhere on the floor when he lowered his trousers, so he'll just have to make do without lubrication. Besides, he thinks, viciously, as he stares at Voldemort's back, as scarred as the front, this man can surely take some pain. He deserves pain.

Sirius can't stop staring at that back, at the scars and the runes. He can't help himself, lets his fingers trace some of them. Voldemort's distinctively masculine shape drives him mad with lust.

He spits in his hand, spreads it on his painfully hard cock, lines himself up and pushes in.

The pleasure is very familiar to him. The tight, hot grasp around his cock as it moves past muscle that refuses to give way.

The way Voldemort's shoulders stiffen against Sirius's own, the sharp intake of breath- it turns the pleasure into something blinding, overwhelming. Sirius has to fight the urge to come undone, right there.

When he's all the way in, he draws back, without giving Voldemort a moment. Because Voldemort doesn't deserve a fucking moment. He deserves nothing. He thrusts back in, forcefully and something gives; it's suddenly easier to move inside him.

Voldemort doesn't make any noise, doesn't move, except to brace his forearms against the wall.

He just *takes it* without complaint and Sirius can't last long, not when faced with such resilience mixed with submission.

Sirius' own hand supports his weight on the wall, right next to one of Voldemort's.

His other arm winds around the smaller torso, drags Voldemort even closer to his body. He slaps his fingers over Voldemort's heart, and *yes, there it is*. It pounds against his fingers fiercely, as if wanting to jump from its ribcage into Sirius' hand. No matter how stoic Voldemort appears, his heartbeat speaks a different truth.

This man, that always defeats Sirius in combat, that took control of Sirius' life, of his dreams, that's ripping a country apart- and he's there in Sirius' arms, docile. His heart beats for *Sirius* in that moment.

For just one moment, Voldemort has to think only of Sirius, filled by him, held by him, fucked by him against a wall.

Sirius comes, seconds or minutes later, head buried in the crook of Voldemort's neck, fingers digging into his chest.

It's such a powerful orgasm, it makes him feel faint, weak at the knees. It goes on forever, pleasure spiking up, even when he thinks it's done.

Eventually, it fades away, and reality crashes around him. *Fuck.* The usual post coital peace and relaxation is missing.

Instead of calming down, he just grows more agitated.

Voldemort still does nothing. In a way, Sirius would rather he turn around, shove Sirius away and curse him straight to hell.

But it doesn't happen. Seconds pass, the silence only broken by their breathing, heavy and laboured, hungry for air, and Sirius is forced to do something. He steps away from Voldemort, shoves his cock back in his trousers. He tries to close his belt, but his hands are trembling so hard, it's a lost battle.

Voldemort pulls his own trousers back up, and Sirius looks around desperately for his wand. He can't find it. He only sees the pale bone of Voldemort's, peeking up from his robe. *I did that. I ripped his robe off and threw it on the floor.*

As soon as Sirius notices it, Voldemort is already bending and in a second the robe is in his hands, and then around him.

Sirius grinds his jaws together and looks up to face the consequences.

Voldemort is still very much calm. Still in control. It's only Sirius that lost it. *What was I thinking?* Why won't he give up in trying to break this man, to dominate him, to win anything against him?

Sirius feels more vulnerable than ever, standing there, shirtless and spent, drunk and yet also desperately sober at the same time.

Voldemort stalks closer, eyes alive with something. *Blacks don't back away,* Sirius tries to remember. Truth is, he would back away, only he's too drained to do so. He doesn't know how he's even standing.

The exhaustion of the past days finally catches up to him.

He shivers when Voldemort is right in his face. He bends his head slightly and *sniffs*.

Sirius feels like prey; he never used to feel like that before Voldemort. But he is prey now, a scared, defenceless deer faced with a wolf.

"What did you do?" His voice is as measured as ever, the low tone sending shivers up and down Sirius' spine. "You smell of magic. Powerful, dark magic. It clings to you like a second skin."

Must be whatever happened to him at his father's grave.

"I don't know," he stammers. He sways on his feet.

"You are very tired, Sirius," Voldemort says, and Sirius must be, because he's having a hard time keeping his eyes open. "You must rest."

Rest. Yes, Sirius would like some rest. Would like the world, the pain to disappear, in only for a few hours.

“I can’t.” He tried back in Grimmauld’s cellars. He tried when he was Padfoot, hiding under a car. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw Marlene, he saw the unmoving phoenix on her side.

Strong, sure fingers grab his arm above his elbow. Sirius leans into him.

He just wants to lean against someone. He always wanted that, ever since his father died and there was no one left to hold Sirius up.

He moves as directed, through the small living space, through the bedroom door, until they reach the bed.

He stumbles into it, sinks into a dark green blanket. It reminds him of his father’s bed. He liked green, too. Sirius would run to his father’s room as a very young boy. He’d sneak under his blankets, and he’d fall asleep easy, the monsters chasing him unable to penetrate the sanctuary.

The world goes quiet. His eyes close.

He dreams of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I know that Marlene died a year later in canon, but I forgot about that when I was planning her death here, so...yeah. Sorry about that. Let's pretend she died a bit sooner.

I know Sirius and Voldemort finally coming together wasn't 'sexy', but I didn't want it to feel like that under the circumstances. Now that they broke the ice, however, I am sure they will have time and *a lot* of practice to be as satisfying as possible. (Seriously, there will be a lot of smut after this, so don't say you weren't warned.)

Thank you for reading! As always, if you have the time, I would love to see your thoughts in the comments. ❤️

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he wakes up, it feels as if he fell off a broom from fifty feet high. Everything hurts, his mouth is dry, his head is pounding something fierce. He tries to open his eyes, but even the dim light that must come from a candle worsens his headache. He groans, displeased, throws an arm over his face and blindly searches the bed with the other, to find a blanket or a sheet to pull over his head.

He finds a blanket, soft to the touch, cool-

Voldemort, without a shirt. Voldemort pressed against the wall. Voldemort, tight and hot around Sirius.

Sirius moves his hand off his face and opens his eyes again, fighting against the discomfort the light brings him.

And there is Voldemort, standing beside the bed, staring down at him. He bends and Sirius flinches away.

Voldemort notices and a little satisfied smirk shows up on that smug face of his, but he only reaches for the nightstand.

“Here.” He holds a potion vial. “For your hangover.”

Sirius sits, carefully. He takes the vial and downs it, without hesitation, to compensate for that small sign of fear he’d shown earlier.

Instantly, he feels amazing. He’s barley just done swallowing, when a wave of fresh energy washes over him, the pain in his head stops, his vision sharpens.

He’s so shocked he forgets to feel awkward. “Did you brew this?”

Eyebrow raised, Voldemort answers, amused. “Of course. You were out for quite some time.”

Sirius has a lot of experience with hangover potions. Most in commerce are barely useful. He brews them himself when he has the time and those are better, but still halfway effective. The best he’d had, were Lily’s. But even those don’t hold a candle to what he’d just experienced.

“You would make a fortune selling these. Seriously. You’d change the world, no need for wars and shit. Everyone would love you. You’d be universally adored, from Sidney to New York.”

“People are very easy to please, aren’t they?”

“Come on, you can’t compare this to anything out there.“

“Truly?”

“As if you don’t know.” Sirius rolls his eyes.

“I do not.” Voldemort sits right beside Sirius, on the edge of the bed. “I never drank enough as to need a hangover potion. But I believe you; after all, everything I brew is far superior to anyone else’s potions.”

Sirius watches him carefully. He doesn’t seem to be mad. At all. If anything, the hunger in his eyes is even more pronounced. Sirius had gotten himself into something that he is quite sure will be the death of him.

“I don’t know what to say about that,” he goes on, slowly. “Slughorn is one of the best Potions Masters in the world.”

He just like to antagonise Voldemort, he can’t help it. Or is this teasing?

Voldemort gives him another smile. “He certainly is. But he taught me all he knew. Besides, even as he skirts across the very fine line of legal and illegal potions, he never truly went overboard, like I did. That would make me more accomplished.”

Sirius leans into the headboard. “Have you ever admitted someone’s better than you, at anything?”

“Of course.”

Sirius does a double take. “Do tell.”

“There are alchemists out there that know more about their craft than I do; there are historians- like Bagshot- who would probably put my knowledge to shame in some matters. Does that make them better wizards? No, of course not. I’d kill them in three second flat, put together. But there are areas in which they have much more experience in. I admit that.”

Sirius wrinkles his nose. “I never can. I hate it when people do better than I, at anything. I hate *you*, constantly, because I’ve never been more humiliated in a duel than when I duel you.”

Voldemort moves closer. “You are young. You’ll learn to accept some facts as you grow and meet more people.”

“I don’t think I’ll grow much older,” Sirius says, after a few seconds.

Instantly, Voldemort becomes angry. Dangerous. There’s no obvious outward signs. No big display of emotions on his face. It’s something in the air, rather, that changes.

“You will,” Voldemort declares. “You’ll live.”

It sounds like a command.

Sirius gives a short bark of laughter. “Funny. Because you’re the most likely cause of death.”

“Is that so?” Voldemort asks, voice so low Sirius has to strain to hear it. “Why would I kill you, Sirius? Because you’re still loyal to Dumbledore?”

Sirius stiffens all over. *He knows.* But Sirius always thought he does. Because he’s not delusional. Voldemort is fiercely intelligent. There is no way Sirius could have fooled him.

“You’re not as loyal to the Order as you believe,” Voldemort goes on. “Month after month, you’re drifting apart from Dumbledore.” Sirius knows this too. Other people see it. “You seek my company and my council over his. You feel more of yourself with me. You enjoy me. “

Enjoy me. And fuck, hadn’t Sirius done just that? Sirius enjoyed Voldemort far too literally.

“I-ah-” Sirius begins but doesn’t know how to go on. If he should address it. Perhaps they can just pretend it hadn’t happened. But that is highly unlikely. “I was drunk,” he says and winces because that sounds lame.

Voldemort seems to know this. “I’ve often noticed alcohol simply gives people the courage to do what they already wanted to do. Strips way inhibitions.”

“Yeah.” Sirius frowns. “I wasn’t-I didn’t mean it like that.” Sirius won’t sit here and try to deny he wanted to fuck Voldemort. “I was saying, I was drunk and when I’m drunk, I get even more self-centred than usual so I wasn’t-ah-as concerned about your -“ *Fuck, but this is stupid.* He crawls on. “About your wellbeing.” He finishes, wincing again. *Lame,* a voice whispers in his head. “I was ah-” Rough. Animalistic. Single-minded. Overcome by desire like he never experienced before. “Rude,” he finishes.

Voldemort tilts his head, regards Sirius closely. “I was under the impression only the fair sex captured your attention.”

Sirius would prefer a hole to appear and swallow him up rather than having this conversation.

He immediately chastises himself. He is Sirius Black. He is not shy. Especially about sex. It’s just sex.

Yeah, right. ‘Just sex’ with Lord Voldemort.

“You are right. I never -with a bloke.” Bloody hell, he *is* shy. He grits his teeth, annoyed with himself. “I never fucked a man.” *There, I fucking said it.*

Voldemort still looks at him with the tilted head.

Seconds pass, seconds that feel like *hours.*

“How about you?” Sirius asks, because the silence gets to him. He remembers his father, warning him that a weak man will be broken by silence. He remembers his first encounter with Voldemort.

Things have changed.

“I never slept with a man,” Voldemort says. Sirius thought as much, deep down. “Nor with a woman.”

A very *heavy* silence follows. Sirius feels his face falling. His mind goes blank. He opens his mouth and closes it again.

And then he bursts out laughing because -because Lord Voldemort had been a virgin. And Sirius had been the one to change that.

He can’t seem to stop. It’s not funny, not all all. But the laughter comes in waves. Fortunately, Voldemort knows Sirius tends to laugh at the worst kind of moments, even if he doesn’t find something particularly amusing.

Sirius laughed himself half to death when James told him about Marlene.

Finally, that sobers him up.

“Sorry,” he says, calming down. “Sorry-I-”

“I enjoy hearing you laugh.”

Oh, fuck.

Sirius wants to leave. Only Voldemort is sitting on the edge of the bed and Sirius doesn’t know how to manoeuvre around him.

“You’re uncomfortable,” Voldemort observes, surprised.

He waits for Sirius to deny it, because Sirius denies any sort of weakness. When he doesn’t, Voldemort’s smile only widens.

“Curious,” he muses. “When you thought I would kill you, back when we first met, you held your composure. When you decapitated Parkinson, you stayed strong. When I just told you earlier that I know of your duplicity, you barely reacted. Yet this mundane experience is getting to you.”

“You’ve just said it’s not mundane. That you never-”

“Mundane for you, not me. Everyone knows you indulge far too often and without much discrimination.”

“How could you not ever had sex?” Sirius asks, bewildered.

Tom Riddle’s picture is seared into his mind like a tattoo; Sirius remembers it in every tiny detail. *Gorgeous.* It just seems impossible that handsome man never fucked anyone.

“I do not tolerate human touch,” Voldemort states, so simply.

Sirius isn’t sure what he’s supposed to say to that. Not when he obviously touched Voldemort. And not just now. Thinking back, there’s been odd touches here and there.

Harmless, in general.

But that's the crux of the matter. Voldemort holds himself away, separate from others. He indeed does not invite any kind of familiarity or closeness with anyone. And the fact that Sirius is the exception-that is uncomfortable.

"People don't deserve to touch me. I never had the urge to be close to anyone. Even as an adolescent, with all those pesky hormones raging about inside me, I felt desire, yet never for someone. Never enough to get over the fact that I'd have to touch them." Voldemort tilts his head again, gaze very intense on Sirius. "Until you."

You do attract the crazy ones, James joked, after meeting some of Sirius's girls.

Apparently, violent people attract each other, Peter added, laughing, when Sirius would show up with scratches on his arms.

Your flings will be the death of you, Remus finished, more somber than the other two.

"I don't know what to tell you," Sirius says, honest.

"That's unusual. You always have something to say. You are rude and insolent, unconcerned with social norms or stepping over boundaries. You stare Lord Voldemort in the eyes as if you were his equal."

"You know who else likes to speak about themselves in third person? House-elves," Sirius snaps.

Voldemort smiles, triumphant. "No one ever dared talk to me this way, after I became Lord Voldemort."

"Well, we've established they're all simpering cowards."

"Yess." It comes out almost a hiss. "But not you."

Sirius is in deep, deep shit. *Drenched in it, really,* he thinks as Voldemort reaches out and lays his hand, experimentally, on Sirius's forearm.

"I do not mind touching you."

"I'm special," Sirius says, half jokingly. "But not unique, I assure you."

"I've traveled all around the earth and in over fifty years, I have not encountered someone to fascinate me so."

This is getting too emotional. And isn't it odd that Sirius, king of high emotions, cannot bear it and Voldemort, king of no emotions, has no trouble expressing them?

Sirius takes away his arm from under Voldemort's hand and, awkward as it is, he shuffles around, until he's standing. His borrowed wand is placed neatly on the nightstand. Sirius tucks it in the back pocket of his father's trousers.

“It is a dangerous place to keep a wand in,” Voldemort comments.

Gods, I fucked Voldemort while wearing my father’s clothes! The shirt is nowhere in sight, he remembers he ripped it off, but the robe is placed neatly on the nightstand, and Sirius hastily covers himself with it.

It’s all starting to weight on him, the severity of what he’s done. Marlene’s death. But the fact that he went ahead and fucked Voldemort-

Gods, he’s such an idiot.

“I’m a shit spy.” Sirius mumbles to himself, something like desperation clawing at his chest.

“And yet Dumbledore sent you to me, anyway. He values your life so little. Such a fool he is.”

Dumbledore is no fool. Not at all.

“Well, he doesn’t find me *special*,” Sirius spits out.

“Clearly.” Voldemort stands and Sirius almost flinches again. But the man only produces a newspaper out of nowhere. He holds it out, for Sirius to take.

“Ah...thanks?” It’s a muggle newspaper, of all things. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

“One’s supposed to read newspapers, generally,” Voldemort mocks.

Sirius tries to focus, completely thrown off.

And then-

Unusual astrological phenomenon.

Sirius doesn’t understand a word from all that muggle speak, terms he’d never encountered before; he only understands *‘rare’* and ‘*possible supernova*’ detected by a Soviet telescope.

“Our papers won’t report it, since wizards aren’t that concerned with space, nor do they keep an eye on it or have the technology to do so. But quite the event you caused, Sirius.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Sirius denies, freaked out, throwing the paper away, once again manoeuvring around Voldemort. He likes to pretend that he walked calmly out of the door, but in reality he quite possible fled from the room and then the house. He throws himself into Apparition the second he’s outside the range of the wards.

(-)

He finds his mother in the siting room, drinking and reading a trashy vampire novel, a half-naked, fanged individual winking at Sirius from the front cover.

“Owl before you visit,” she snaps at him, but now that he knows she’d been worried for him, he can almost see the relief in her eyes when she spots him. Right before they narrow. “Are those Orion’s robes?”

“Where’s Regulus?”

“Why?”

“I need a favour.”

Her frown deepens, her eyes move over his robe. “Kreacher! Get Regulus! Did you take your dog back?”

Sirius nods. “Yes. Thank you for looking after him.”

“I didn’t,” she huffs. “As if I’ve got the time to watch over dogs. Kreacher did.”

“Right.”

“Sirius!”

He can hear the relief in Regulus’ tone when he enters the room.

“My wand is in Lestrange Manor,” Sirius tells him, getting straight to the point. “Can you get it for me?”

Regulus blinks at him, but he quickly scolds his face in that stoic expression of his. “Yes.”

“Great. Thanks.”

They all stare at each other.

“Now. Can you get it *now*?” Sirius asks.

“Alright.” Regulus exchanges a look with their mother, and then he heads over for the fireplace, taking a handful of floo powder in his fist.

Sirius sits on an armchair as far away from his mother as possible. He’s very aware he fucked Voldemort hours before and he didn’t shower.

The silence is heavy, uncomfortable, as it always is between them.

Sirius looks at the tapestry, though he knows he shouldn’t. He doesn’t want to see his name burnt.

But he can’t help himself. Like an aching tooth that one can’t help but push at with the tongue.

And there it is.

It doesn't bring him the anger or pain he thought it would. He's too numb for it. He's glad he didn't see it *before*, though. It would have cut deeply. As it is, he just stares blankly at it.

"My condolences." His mother breaks the silence, and for once she doesn't sound scathing.

Sirius glances at her.

"Thank you," he says through gritted teeth.

She opens her mouth, but closes it before she can say something else.

The discomfort only grows, exponentially.

"She…" his mother starts again. "She was a - she came from a good family," his mother finishes, lamely, not knowing what else to say about Marlene.

Sirius snorts. "You'd have hated her."

"We'll never know. You never brought her home to meet me. Your betrothed, and you didn't bother to tell your own mother-"

"We weren't engaged," Sirius snaps. "And we're done talking about it."

The fireplace roars back to life. Regulus steps out of it. "She wouldn't give it to me," he says, eyes wide. "I'm sorry, Sirius. I tried, but she - you know how Bella gets. She wouldn't let me have it, and Rodolphus kicked me out when we started arguing. She said if you want it, you have to get it yourself."

The end table at his side starts shaking when his magic goes out of his control.

He grips the armrest until he cuts of circulation.

His mother stands. She smoothes her robes. "I shall be right back," she says, and she marches off to the fireplace.

"Mother, don't," Regulus says. "She was in a mood-"

"Please," she spits. "I know how to handle Bellatrix, and, I assure you, Lestrange won't be kicking me out."

"He better not," Sirius says, teeth crushing against each other. "Or I'll fucking kill him."

"Mind your language!" she hisses at him, before she steps into the fireplace.

Regulus watches the dying flames left in her wake. "I don't know who to worry about in this situation."

"Lestrange, probably," Sirius mutters. Caught between two incredibly bitchy and stubborn women.

Regulus swallows. He comes closer, carefully, as if approaching a wild animal that could snap at any time.

“Sirius, I’m sorry about McKinnon. Are you- how are you?”

“Fine.”

“What happened? Why-”

“Forget it,” Sirius demands, and his brother knows when to stop prodding at him, hard lessons learned in their childhood.

The silence between them isn’t tense or uncomfortable, the way silences are with his mother.

Regulus was always quiet. He and Cissa, two oases of peace in their otherwise violent, crazy family.

His mother comes back quickly. She’s holding her wand in one hand, and Sirius’ in the other, her face set in stone.

“There,” she says, throwing his wand on the end table. “Kreacher! Bring me another drink! You want one?” she asks Sirius, a muscle twitching in her jaw.

She looks impressive when she glances down at him. He remembers how intimidating he found her, growing up. How no one was willing to cross her, people fleeing from her. Only her youngest brother was willing to engage in yelling matches with her.

She is the only person Sirius knows of that had the nerve to scream at his father. Not that it phased the man, but certainly no one else dared to speak to him the way she did.

She’s just as intimidating now, even if her hair is half grey, and she’s dressed all in black, even if now she only reaches his shoulder.

“Thanks,” he says, taking his wand, putting the borrowed one on the table. “I can’t stay for a drink. I have to- I need to…” he trails off.

He stands.

“Come to dinner Sunday,” she orders.

“Alright.”

She nods, satisfied. “Kreacher! My drink!” she screeches, going back to her armchair.

Sirius hates this drinking business. It’s unlike his mother. He doesn’t like to imagine her drinking all day long, shut in one of these rooms.

But he has his own problems to deal with.

You’re the one that caused her problems, a masochistic voice informs him.

Yet he doesn't have the energy for self-flagellation, so he leaves.

(-)

His welcome in Godric's Hollow is vastly different.

James hugs him as soon as Sirius enters; he hadn't even let go of Sirius when Lily is hugging him, too.

And then Peter.

He always enjoyed being touched, being spoiled and looked after. He always sought it, desperately.

But now it's suffocating. Once more, he's keenly away he left Voldemort's bed not an hour before.

"I need a shower," he says, cutting off the others, all expressing how sorry they are, tears in their eyes.

"Of course," James says, hand clasped on Sirius' shoulder.

"And some clothes."

"We can transfigure some of mine to fit you-"

"Lily." Sirius turns to her. "Can I ask you a favour?"

"Anything," she whispers, green eyes shining with tears.

"Can you go to my house and pack up her things? All of them?"

She swallows, bites her lip. "Yes. Of course."

"Everything she had," Sirius insists. He feels his voice cracking, a knot lodges in his throat. "I- take all the sheets and blankets, too. Take them out."

"Where should I take -"

"I don't care. Burn them. Throw them. I don't care."

"Yes. Peter, come along. I'll send him back with some of your clothes, so you can change."

(-)

He spends so long in the bathroom, submerged in scalding hot water, that James checks on him twice.

He doesn't want to think of Marlene, so he just thinks of Voldemort.

A part of Sirius wishes he'd stayed there, even if he felt so desperate to leave when he woke up.

But now he longs for that bed. It felt… safe. Quiet. A sanctuary from the world.

"Here." James comes in, places a stack of clothes on the laundry basket. "Peter brought them."

Eventually, Sirius drags himself out of the bathroom. He thought he'd feel better, clean and in his own clothes, but he doesn't.

He feels shallow, broken.

His stomach hurts badly. He can't remember when he last ate. James walks around in circles around him, like a mother hen, until Sirius accepts to drink some tea.

"Remus was here," James says. "After he learned what happened, he came here to look for you. He wanted to-"

"I don't care."

Lily and Peter return around midnight. They both look like they've been crying, and Sirius remembers Marlene was their friend, too.

He didn't want to go home and have to deal with her things lying around, waiting for her, unaware she died, so she's not coming back for them. It would have been too painful. He didn't stop to consider it would be just as painful for his friends.

James insists Sirius should spend the night in Godric's Hollow. Lily backs him up.

They give him their spare bedroom.

"Take this," Lily says, forcefully shoving a vial in his hands. "You need to sleep."

She has that determined look on her face, so he doesn't fight her. He wants to sleep, anyway.

He drinks whatever she brewed and falls asleep as soon as he lies down.

When he wakes, James is there, sitting at the foot of his bed, dark circles under his eyes.

"I'm not a baby, Jamie," Sirius snaps at him, sitting up. "I'm fine."

"Sure." James stands, yawning. "Lily made us breakfast. She won't let you leave until you eat, I hope you realise. And don't call me Jamie!" He tries for a smile.

Sirius tries to smile back. He's not sure he succeeds.

Lily indeed forces him to eat. His stomach hurts even more after he is done, but he doesn't complain.

"I'm fine," he keeps saying, whenever they give him worried glances.

When he finally leaves Godric's Hollow, having to swear multiple times he won't disappear again, Sirius doesn't go home.

He dreads that part.

He goes to a pub and gets drunk first. A muggle pub. He doesn't cause any trouble, surprising himself, just sits at the bar and drinks in silence.

When it's getting hard to speak and the bartender no longer understands him, he decides it's safe to go home.

But it wasn't safe.

Lily might have taken all Marlene's things away; she even took down the pictures of her from the mantlepiece.

Yet Sirius feels her presence, anyway. Remembers her standing in every room, sitting on every piece of furniture, dancing away in the hallways.

He feels Bellatrix' presence, too. Even in the wall paint- *everything* in his house is chosen by Bellatrix.

Sirius takes out his wand, and his numbness finally breaks into a rage.

(-)

"Sweet Merlin," Peter whispers, the next morning, coming in with a packed lunched and a thermos filled with coffee.

He finds Sirius sitting in the middle of the rubble.

He destroyed every piece of furniture. He burned his mattress, he ripped out the wallpapers. He drank all he could from what he had left in the house and threw away the rest of Rodolphus' whiskey.

"Felt like redecorating," Sirius slurs.

Peter walks carefully around the disaster until he reaches Sirius.

“I’m starving,” Sirius says, grabbing the bag from him, tearing it apart to get to the sandwiches Peter made. Peter always made great sandwiches.

At Hogwarts, he’d make four every day at breakfast, and tuck them in his bag, because he knew Sirius and James would get hungry again long before lunch.

For some stupid reason, remembering that insignificant detail almost brings tears to his eyes. He blinks them away, tearing into the food.

“I’m getting tired just imagining having to clean this up,” Peter says, looking around.

“You’re going to pretend you haven’t noticed the Dark Mark on my arm?” Sirius asks, taking another bite.

He’s shirtless, having grown hot and sweaty in his destructive rage.

“Yes,” Peter says. “Unless you want to talk about it.”

“I don’t.”

Peter shrugs. “It’s not a surprise, anyway. When you showed up at James’ house, you weren’t wearing your robes. They were a bit small. I could see some of the Mark peeking through. James and Lily must have seen it, and they seemed unfazed. Obviously, you’re a spy.”

“Wish Remus would think that way. He didn’t even see it, but -”

“Remus isn’t an idiot. He must imagine that you can’t walk around with a Dark Mark on your arm without Dumbledore knowing. I guess he just isn’t sure where your heart truly is.”

Well, that makes two of us.

Peter sighs. He takes out his wand. “Right. Let’s try to get rid of this mess.”

They’re awful at it. Sirius is amazing at destroying things, he has a gift for it, but not cleaning.

Peter didn’t grow up with an elf to pick up after him, but he’s not very good either.

At some point, Sirius sees Dumbledore Apparate outside the blood wards.

He hastily puts his shirt on; Dumbledore loves secrecy, he wouldn’t appreciate Peter knowing about the Mark.

Sirius receives him inside. Dumbledore doesn’t pay attention to the mess. He lays a hand on Sirius’ shoulder and goes on about Marlene, what a tragic loss it all is.

Sirius doesn’t meet his eyes, stands there and lets the words fly by him, until Dumbledore runs out of pleasantries.

“How are you doing?” he asks, eventually.

Sirius gestures to the mess behind him. An accurate representation of his feelings.

“Will you allow me to help?”

“Be my guest.”

Sirius and Peter sit on the stairs and watch him work.

In a matter of minutes, the house is spotless.

They rarely witness Dumbledore doing magic. He was done with teaching by the time Sirius came to Hogwarts. He doesn’t fight out there, in the war.

By the time he’s done, Sirius has never seen a house so clean. And he’s lived with elves all his life.

But now the floors shine, there’s not a single speck of dust in sight. The walls are white and pristine.

It’s like a brand new house.

“Peter, will you give us a moment?” Sirius asks, and Peter nods, takes his thermos and leaves.

“You can tell Moody he can calm down and stop hiding,” Sirius says. “The Death Eaters won’t come after him just yet. Not until they kill all the Aurors that were with him the night he killed Evan. The Aurors, and their families, as I’m sure you caught on.”

Dumbledore sighs. He looks ancient.

“Moody will live to see it all unfold,” Sirius says. He can hear how devoid of emotion his voice is. “No need to sleep in hidden bunkers around the country anymore, not until they’re done with the other two Aurors and their loved ones.”

“Smith left England with his parents and wife yesterday,” Dumbledore says.

Sirius barks out a laugh. “They’ll find him. He can go to the moon, and they’ll still find him. Rodolphus won’t rest until he has his revenge.”

“You mean Voldemort.”

“No,” Sirius snaps.“If I meant Voldemort, I’d have said so. I mean Rodolphus and Yaxley and Dolohov.”

“So Dolohov is a Death Eater. You didn’t tell me before.”

“I just found out,” Sirius snarls at him. “He was one of those that went after Mar- after the McKinnons. He’s the one that killed the kid.”

He feels the absurd need to inform Dumbledore that Voldemort didn’t order the boy’s death. He squashes the instinct. It doesn’t matter, and he definitely shouldn’t try to defend

Voldemort's reputation.

Besides, he was just fine with ordering the death of Marlene's niece, a child herself, even if not as young.

And you fucked him, even knowing that.

Dumbledore waits for a few seconds until Sirius controls his anger.

"Have you seen Voldemort since-?"

Sirius' jaw ticks. "I did."

"And you controlled yourself?"

Sirius laughs. "I did well enough," he answers. He didn't come the second his prick entered Voldemort. That took a lot of control.

"Will he believe you are still on his side, even after Marl-"

"Didn't you say he doesn't understand love or affection? I told him she was just someone I had fun with, and he had no issues believing that."

So dumb for a genius, Sirius thinks as Dumbledore seems to accept this explanation easily.

Dumbledore is so perceptive, he understands theories no one else does, he can put things together at a glance, untangle lies, and yet he spent *seven years* teaching Tom Riddle and he somehow believes Voldemort is incapable of any human emotion, that he lacks even basic understanding of relationships.

Mind you, he is a virgin. Was a virgin.

But that doesn't mean Voldemort doesn't understand people. In fact, Sirius thinks Voldemort understands people better than Dumbledore.

Dumbledore is too far removed from anyone, self exiled in that castle. He perceives them all as children, because he saw them all grow up, even old Order members like McGonagall. He's so ancient, he has no close confidants- no confidants at all, Sirius suspects- and he lost the skill to read people accurately. At least complex people, like Voldemort, that can't be placed easily in a category or another.

Yet Dumbledore seems to have labeled Voldemort as 'evil personified' and nothing else, long before, and nothing anyone would say will get Voldemort out of the box Dumbledore shoved him in, inside his mind.

Could be the Horcrux at fault. Dumbledore knows dark magic- in the sense he studied some of it. But he doesn't practice it. For him, it must be clear that someone who hacked their own soul is beyond any human emotion.

Sirius grew up with dark magic. It's in his veins. His ancestors performed magic so dark, they bound astral bodies to their bloodline. Sirius knows that no matter how dark one goes, it doesn't take away from the human experience.

(-)

Tuesday rolls around, but Sirius' Mark doesn't burn. Granted, it usually doesn't, Sirius goes there before Voldemort has the time to call him.

But this Tuesday, Sirius doesn't go, and Voldemort doesn't summon him.

Does he regret it? Sirius wonders, laid on the floor of his empty house, using a folded robe as a pillow.

No, Sirius doesn't think Voldemort regrets it. He seemed perfectly content the day after.

Do I regret it?

Sirius tries to wish it never happened, but he doesn't quite convince himself.

In fact, he thinks back on it often. The only thing to take his mind off Marlene and the pain she left behind.

When he tries to sleep, instead of focusing on the loneliness, the lack of her at his side, he just remembers Voldemort. It's all in vivid detail, unlike the blur those days have become in his head.

But there's nothing blurry about those moments. Voldemort's naked chest, every scar and rune, seared into Sirius' mind; feeling like he's on top of the world when he had Voldemort trapped between him and the wall.

He comes to the memory, two times in an hour. His mind seeks to make him feel guilty for it. Marlene was freshly in the ground and there Sirius was, fucking someone. Here he is, wanking.

But he refuses to feel guilt. *She deserves it, the stupid bitch.* She forced her way into his life, into his house, she made him care and then she went ahead and died.

He's angry with her, and that keeps the remorse at bay.

Sirius didn't want to get attached, he didn't want to have to lose someone again, but she insisted- she attached herself to him, and now he's suffering for it.

Voldemort is immortal, a traitorous thought chooses to remind him. That's one person Sirius will never have to bury, or doge his funeral.

“It was a one-time thing,” he lies, shamefully. His words echo in the empty room, come back to mock him instantly.

The dread comes. Voldemort won’t be dying, but that has many drawbacks, too. If Sirius felt trapped by Marlene, if he resented her for stealing his independence, then Voldemort-

I can’t get away from him. If he doesn’t want to let me go, there is nothing I can do about it.

Fear creeps up his spine. Impossibly, it doesn’t lessen his lust.

(-)

He gets a note from Gringotts informing him a nice chunk of gold had been deposited in Alphard’s vault.

From the Potter vault.

“If you mention gold, I’m throwing you out,” James says, as soon as he opens the door, when Sirius Apparates to Godric’s Hollow.

He has that stubborn looks on his face. Sirius knows that look. The *Potter scowl*, Lily calls it. Useless to argue against it. Ever since he saw Sirius’ now empty house, and Sirius, drunk out of his mind, had said he doesn’t have much gold left, something glinted in James’ eyes.

Sirius should have seen it coming.

“I’ll give it back, as soon as I can,” he says.

James grins, pats his back, and pulls Sirius inside. “Lily, Padfoot is here.”

“Great!” Lily’s voice come from somewhere around the house. “Keep him here until I come down. I need to make sure he eats something!”

“I’ll get started on lunch!” James yells back, and he runs to the kitchen before Lily can show up and stop him.

Sirius heads over the couch, grabs a magazine that is open on top of it-

Is this a twisted way of grieving, or did he never care for her?

“Oh, don’t read that!” Lily says, hastily, ripping the recent issue of Witch Weekly out of Sirius’ hands, but not before Sirius sees a picture of himself with a petite blonde in his lap, at a pub right at the intersection between Diagon and Knockturn; not before he sees Marlene’s name mentioned in the article and *‘not even a week since her tragic death’*. He thinks he also glimpsed a supposed date he and Marlene were supposed to get married on.

“Ignore it, just that Skeeter woman trying to sell her articles.” Lily pats his arm, then drags him to the kitchen, where James is attempting to prepare a salad.

Sirius is not hungry, he’s still hungover, jumbled memories of the past night trying to make sense of the events in his head. He gives up and begs Lily for a cup of strong coffee.

(-)

The first thing he buys for his house- curtains. Thick, long, black. Sirius covers his windows as soon as the sun goes down.

He’s a tad afraid of the stars.

He isn’t sick as he’d been at sixteen- it was terrible back then; Sirius forgot how to be a *human*. He didn’t know how to walk. How to speak. How to breathe. He’d grow dizzy, and only then he’d remember he needed to breathe. He spent days in bed.

It hasn’t been anything like that now; he doesn’t feel sick at all, just apprehensive, whenever he sees the stars, remembering the feeling of spinning out of control, being pulled up, unable to stop it.

“You need to be outside,” Bella said, dragging Sirius out of his bed, well after midnight, speaking in hushed tones, as to not alert the rest of the household. *“You need to be under the stars. You’ll improve then, you’ll see. You’ll feel normal again.”*

Sirius protests, he can barely stand, and he is terrified of the night-sky, had hid from it ever since it happened. “How do you know?”

Bella helps him don a robe, supports his weight, as she drags him through Grimmauld’s hallways.

“I- well, since you aren’t improving, I told someone about what happened.”

“You aren’t supposed to speak to anyone about astral magic!”

“I had to! You’re so sick! Besides, he’s discrete. Unlike the Healers.”

The Healers not only couldn’t help Sirius when Cygnus took him to St Mungo, but they called the Aurors, because they detected dark magic everywhere on Sirius, and they seemed to believe Cygnus cursed him. If they weren’t Blacks, if his uncle wouldn’t have influence and sway in the Ministry, they’d have arrested Cygnus, no doubt.

“He is a special man; he said you need to be out, Sirius. I trust him.”

“I don’t want to go out! I’m scared,” he confesses, what he’d only confess to Bella.

"You're with me," she says, standing on her toes to kiss him lightly. When did I grow taller than her, Sirius wonders, shocked. "Do you truly think I'd let anyone or anything hurt you? Don't be silly."

Sirius trusted her, and after only a few minutes outside, his health improved considerably.

Thinking back on it, he now realises that 'special' man had been Voldemort. At the time he was too sick to question the identity of this man Bellatrix spoke of- after all, she knew plenty of dubious people- and he hadn't yet seen her Dark Mark.

Sirius goes out at night, and he feels fine; it's just that he never looks up.

So he boards his windows with the heavy curtains, though he's rarely home, preferring to spend his nights in pubs or on top of someone, in a foreign house.

(-)

He finds Rabastan sitting on the stairs outside of Sirius' house.

Sirius lands the bike, eager to get off it. He overdid it with the Muggle drugs. He's truly dizzy, and the rising sun is hurting his eyes. It's a wonder he made it home in once piece.

For a second he wonders if he's hallucinating Rabastan.

But no, Rabastan is there, and he stands up from his previous sitting position. His hand goes into his robe, and Sirius knows it's to hold his wand.

"What did I do to you?" Sirius asks, stumbling to his front door. He tries to remember if he'd insulted Rabastan lately, to warrant a visit in which Rabastan wants his wand in his hand.

"Huh?" Now Rabastan looks confused, too.

"You seem ready to curse me," Sirius points out. He can't find the damn house keys, patting himself all over.

"What? No- it's just a precaution, in case *you* curse me."

"Be a good lad and spell the door open, will you?"

Rabastan gawks at him. "I can't. It's warded with blood."

"Right. Right. Well, fuck."

He sits on his doorstep. Rabastan remains standing for another handful of seconds, but eventually sits beside Sirius.

“I didn’t know,” he says, voice so low it’s more of a whisper. “I didn’t know she’d die. She wasn’t supposed to die. Rodolphus didn’t know, either.”

It takes a few moments for Sirius to connect the dots. “You came to apologise?” he asks, incredulous. He lays his head on the wall, closes his eyes.

“I- yes. I suppose so.”

“Hmm. Then apologise.” Sirius should open his eyes and look at his face, it’s bound to be amusing, but he can’t make himself.

Probably Rodolphus told his brother Lestranges don’t apologise, either.

“I’m sorry you’re in pain,” Rabastan says, carefully, which is not really an apology. Sirius should know, he’s an expert at crafting non-apologies himself.

“I am in pain; my back is killing me. I need a fucking bed. Summon my wand, should be in one of these pockets, somewhere. Can’t be arsed to look for it.”

Rabastan finds it, places it in Sirius’ hand, then hauls him up.

Sirius taps the wand on his door, and it springs open.

“What happened to the furniture?” Rodolphus enquires. “Do you even have a bed?”

No, he doesn’t. Sirius forgot about that. For a second, he’s just as surprised to see his empty house as Rabastan is.

“I don’t blame you,” Sirius tells him. He didn’t even consider it, not for a second. “I only blame that vengeful cunt that used to be my cousin. Now fuck off and let me sleep.”

(-)

He pretends Bellatrix isn’t there. He does not acknowledge her, and she does not acknowledge him, either.

He is seated at the other head of the table, far from everyone else. Since Lucius is present to sit on Voldemort’s left, Sirius went to his usual chair.

He tries not to stare at Voldemort but he fears he is failing miserably. He can’t help but look at him. He can’t help but remember having him pressed against a wall.

“You seem distracted,” Voldemort says, half-way through the meeting, eyes moving between Lucius and Rodolphus.

Voldemort acts as if they didn't fuck, and it bothers Sirius immensely. He is no different from usual.

You called me special, Sirius wants to remind him. *You sat on that bed and called me special.*

He's so used to having Voldemort's undivided attention, that he is not happy when Voldemort gives him no preferential treatment with others in the room.

It's irrational. He should be happy Voldemort is so discrete. Sirius would be equally annoyed if anyone would ever find out about that night.

Yet there he is, bothered.

Snap out of it.

"I apologise, My Lord," Lucius says, rubbing his forehead. "We had dinner with the in-laws last night."

"With *all* the in-laws," Rodolphus says, wincing. Sirius noticed he walked gingerly before he took his seat.

Bellatrix smirks, but Sirius refuses to linger on her face, refuses to smirk back.

"Cygnus, Druella, Pollux, Arcturus- all of them," Rodolphus continues, and he turns to glare at Sirius. "Walburga," he adds, jaws working furiously.

Rabastan tries to hide a smile, obviously taking pleasure in whatever torment befell his brother and Lucius the night before.

Sirius remembers family gatherings were never pleasant for Rodolphus. He's an outsider, and he was forever treated as one, when he'd been forced to attend a family birthday, sitting lonely to the side.

At least now he has Lucius there with him; Sirius is convinced he's equally treated as an outsider.

His aunt Druella is still sometimes treated as such, and she became a Black *decades* before, had given birth to *three* Black children.

"Aww, did sweet grandmama scare you?" Sirius asks, mocking, though his grandmother scares him, too, occasionally.

Voldemort sighs. "Are you injured?"

Rodolphus turns his eyes to him. "I'll be fine."

"Who cursed you?"

"I have no idea. They all ganged up on me."

“Well, who made you insult daddy?” Bellatrix demands, with a pout. “Don’t be a baby, it’s a measly, harmless curse.”

Sirius is certain it was Cygnus that forced Rodolphus to insult him. He can envision it perfectly. Cygnus would have picked on Bellatrix, made her uncomfortable, and Rodolphus must have reacted, as he always did.

But Bellatrix will always side with *daddy dearest*, even if she hates him more than half the time.

“How long do I need to keep you and Cygnus apart?” Voldemort asks.

“About three months, I’d say.” Rodolphus shrugs.

“And you?” Voldemort turns to Lucius.

“I’m fine, My Lord. I know better than to go head to head with a Black, at a gathering full of them, no less.”

“Lickspittle,” Rodolphus snarls at him.

Sirius tries to ignore the jealousy he feels that he wasn’t invited. He should be happy. Cygnus’ birthdays were always awful. Sirius forever tried to avoid them. His mother was more quarrelsome than ever on such occasions; mostly because her own mother would drag herself out of France only for her baby boy’s birthday, and the two women did not get along.

Yet he can’t help but wish he had been there, or at least given the *option* to attend. He misses his grandfather Pollux, his kind eyes, the warmth in them so similar to the one his Uncle Alphard had.

It must have been a tense event; the first major family gathering after Sirius’ father and Alphard’s death.

It leaves Sirius sad, thinking about it. He’s so distracted, he barely pays attention when Voldemort resumes talking about a Wizengamont vote.

(-)

“Sirius, a word,” Voldemort says, when the meeting is done and they all stand to leave.

Sirius hovers around the door after the others depart.

“Would you like a drink?” Voldemort asks. “It’s not an order. You can say no.”

It’s personal then.

Say no. Get away from him. As far away as you can. Go to your grandfather and beg him to give you shelter in France.

"Sure."

Voldemort waves a hand and two glasses and a bottle of whiskey float their way. A very muggle whiskey.

Sirius sits, giving the bottle a strange look.

"Someone told me muggle whiskey is more refined than ours," Voldemort says, as the glasses fill themselves with amber liquid.

Not all muggle whiskey, but that very expensive brand is.

"I have this very ridiculous image of you going out to London to buy a bottle of whiskey."

Voldemort gives him a little smirk. But how in the world did he get it? It's not like he can ask his blood purist Death Eaters to bring him anything muggle, can he?

"For so many years, I only dwelled in magical spaces. I recently went to London and- the fashion, these days, it is unnerving. Women, in men's suits. Rings dangling from people's noses. Women and men in very short denim trousers."

"Jeans," Sirius corrects, instantly cheering up.

His mother said almost exactly the same things, staring out of Grimmauld's windows at muggles passing by.

"Back in the forties, everyone was so elegant. Or they tried, at least. Even the very poor. Especially on Sundays. It was Church day. Everyone wore their best attires."

"I've been to a church once," Sirius says, grabbing his glass. "Lily insisted on having her wedding in one."

"How does she reconcile magic with God? Surely, she's been paying attention in History of Magic. God, and by extension the Church, is not fond of witchcraft."

"Ah, well. To tell you the truth, we all sleep through Binns' class. He's extremely boring."

"He was boring when alive," Voldemort mutters.

The man is *that* old.

"In any case, she's aware of the Witch Hunt. She did the church thing for her parents. Was a bit weird, but the building was nice. Yet so *solemn*. You'd think a wedding would appreciate cheers and laughter and stuff. But no, I had to be told to keep quiet so many times. "

Voldemort smiles at him. "Yes, you don't fit well in a church. I didn't either, when I was very young and my magic was out of my control. While most muggles do not believe in magic,

would rather tell themselves they are too tired and simply imagining things, that's not the Church. Oh, they believe."

His eyes flash, dangerously.

"They tried to have me exorcised."

"Isn't that for ghosts? To expel them from a location?" Sirius frowns.

"Muggles believe a human body can serve as a vessel for demonic possession. They tie you up and chant over you, dose you in holy water."

"Fuck," Sirius says, revolted. And then- "What is holy water?"

"Water blessed by a priest. Suffice to say, no demon came out of me, only an endless string of swear words."

Sirius is taken aback. "You? Swearing?"

"I was raised mostly on the streets of an ill reputed side of London, Sirius. No one there was concerned too much with manners. They weren't even concerned with proper English."

Sirius laughs, despite himself. "And you have such a nice posh accent."

Stop flirting with him!

"I modelled it after the richest people in my class at Hogwarts. It was Cockney before I came to school."

"Stop it!" Sirius downs his glass, pours another.

"Oh, yes. Atrocious."

Sirius lights a cigarette, leans back in his chair. "You must have had a rough go, between dear ol' Slytherins."

"I had a bumpy first year, yes. But I made sure they payed for it the following six years."

His smile turns *vicious*; a fag floats out of Sirius' pack, lights itself in the air, before slotting seamlessly between Voldemort's long fingers.

"I'm sure you all out-bullied each other," Sirius offers.

"We tried; of course, no one could out-bully Walburga. I hear you take after her. Did you really try to feed Severus to Lupin?"

"Merlin, I can't believe he whined about it to you, the little crybaby."

Call him Snape, not Severus. Severus implies familiarity, and Sirius does not like to imagine there is any familiarity between Voldemort and the greasy overgrown bat.

“If you’d have been a Slytherin and would have pulled that stunt, Dumbledore would have had you expelled before you could blink. He’s the one that’s heavily prejudiced against us. Look at one of his little lions, trying to commit murder and he slaps you with detention.”

Sirius shifts, not liking to think about that time. “He never did trust me, after that.”

“He trusts you enough to spy for him.” Voldemort leans back in his chair. He takes a long drag out of his cigarette, his gaze wandering over Sirius.”Isn’t that a dangerous move? He has this boy, who’s dark and twisted and uses dark magic and he sends him to me. Either he really trusts you or he wants to get rid of you.”

Sirius tries to let that very real possibility fly over his head. Lately, Voldemort had doubled down on his attempts to turn Sirius against Dumbledore, ever since the Horcrux debacle.

“I think he hopes for the best, really. He gave up on me long ago,” Sirius says, trying to sound nonchalant, to not let Voldemort sniff the insecurity on him. “Now he’s just trying to use me to the best of his abilities. If I happen to die, I suppose I’m one headache less.”

Voldemort seems displeased to hear that.

“How can you not resent him?”

“I do. I’m not his biggest fan. Never was. But I understand the man. He has to coordinate a bunch of Gryffindors and he can’t use force to subdue us. He has to rely on manipulation and lies to keep a balance. You’d have a fit if you were to have an Order meeting with me, James, the Prewett twins, McGonagall.” For a moment, Sirius tries to picture it, Voldemort in charge of the Order. It makes him laugh. “The chaos, the stupid fucking questions, everyone has an opinion. You’d throw ourself out the balcony or murder us all and be without supporters.”

“I have Bella and Rodolphus in my inner circle,” Voldemort reminds Sirius. “They have stupid questions and opinions, but they simply approach me in private. I will not have chaos in meetings.”

“I suppose you have your spitfires too.” Sirius is forced to agree.

“Eventually, I’ll take you to a meeting with giants. See how that goes. Or with Greyback and Rodolphus. They despite each other. The wolf thinks Rodolpush is a pampered, rich bastard and Rodolpush thinks Greyback unworthy to even lick his feet. And yet they sit there and they talk and get along in my presence. I’d like to see Dumbledore manage that.”

“He can be tough, you know. It’s not all kindly old twinkles in his eyes, like people think.”

Voldemort raises an eyebrow. “I’ve known nothing but that Dumbledore. He was always hostile towards me.”

Sirius would give a lot of gold to see these two giants of magic interact. It’s bound to be fascinating and highly entertaining. It doesn’t even have to be a duel- just them exchanging witty insults should be glorious.

“He is the one that delivered my Hogwarts letter.”

Sirius' fantasies slip out of his mind. "No fucking way!"

Dumbledore delivered Voldemort's school letter? How does he sit in those order meetings, hiding all his history with Voldemort?

"He caught me stealing. Set my dresser on fire."

"I have a hard time believing he'd do that to a kid," Sirius says, throw off. He tries to picture Dumbledore alongside an eleven year old Tom Riddle. It differs vastly from the entertainment he imagined seconds before, with both of them grown up. A shiver runs down his spine.

"Oh, he did." A muscle jumps in Voldemort's jaw, tension pulling at his shoulders, raising them higher."I told you, I only know that side of him. He decided I was evil as soon as he set his eyes on me."

Sirius remembers Dumbledore, in his office, after the incident with Snape. Standing behind his desk, peering down at Sirius with those piercing blue eyes, nothing grandfatherly about him. Just a cold, judging look that made Sirius wilt under it. And Sirius was not eleven- he was almost a man grown, with an influential name, Bellatrix and her husband in his corner. In fact, as Dumbledore stared at him, Sirius had to reassure himself that he has powerful people on his side, that his fate won't depend on Dumbledore's whims.

How would he have felt if he'd been eleven? If he'd had been no-one, no family to back him up-

This is Voldemort, Sirius tries to remind himself. *Dumbledore was right to judge him.*

"You are evil," he says, but it comes much softer than what he intended.

"There is no good and evil. Only power."

"Sure, but you understand how normal people view good and evil, and you fall under evil. "

Voldemort plays with his glass, long fingers going over the crystal edges. "I can see why people perceive me that way, now. But I was eleven when he came to me. How can a child be evil? The muggles were too stupid to understand, at least. Uneducated, ignorant bugs. But Dumbledore knew it was not the devil, but my magic that caused accidents around me, that allowed me to control snakes. He is not uneducated; for all his faults, he remains an intelligent man. Yet he judged me so harshly."

"What do snakes talk about?" Sirius asks, after a long period of silence, in which Voldemort starts looking through Sirius, lost into the past, growing stiffer and angrier by the second. Sirius' question pulls him out of it.

"Food, mostly," he answers. "Not the most expansive vocabulary. The bigger the snake, the more magical, the smarter it is and able to hold a decent conversation. But, for the most part, they are very direct. Food, sleep, mating."

The last word falls heavily around them, reminds Sirius of why he's been invited to have a drink. Because he'd fucked Voldemort and Voldemort had sat on the bed and told Sirius how special he was.

"They brought me mice to try to feed me. As I grew, they insisted I needed a mate."

Sirius gives a bark of laughter, picturing an adder giving life advice to teenage Voldemort.

Voldemort smiles, too, the anger from before vanished, but there's something predatory in the twist of his lips, in the way his gaze settles over Sirius' face.

Clearly, the conversation brought them to where Voldemort wanted it. *Why did I bring up the stupid snakes? Should have just stuck to discussing Dumbledore.*

He'd have made sure you end up on this topic, anyway. The way he looks at Sirius leaves no doubt in his mind.

Get it over it.

Sirius gulps another mouthful of whiskey, meeting Voldemort's gaze. "Just say what you want."

"You."

Well, that was *direct.*

Sirius' heart starts racing; he tries to blame the warmth spreading through his blood on the whiskey.

"In what way?"

Voldemort tilts his head. "I'm not entirely sure. I was thinking it will reveal itself as we move forward."

As we move forward. Of course, Sirius knew already that night couldn't have been just a one-time thing. He even hoped it wouldn't be, even if he knows this isn't wise at all.

Still, to hear it laid out like that, the truth of it, that he'd stumbled into something so insanely dangerous, with no end in sight-

"I am not fond of long-lasting things," he warns, lighting another cigarette. "I quite like to keep the little freedom I've got left. I've never been with someone in a way that required me to be -to be anything, really."

Voldemort frowns slightly, before seemingly arriving to a conclusion. "You mean you do not like to commit."

Sirius pours more whiskey. "Yes. That's right."

“But you are committed to the Order. To me. And one would argue these are engagements that are far harder, if not impossible, to get out of.”

“It’s different,” he argues. “Like a job, if you will. My personal time is my own and I spend it as the mood strikes me.”

“I wasn’t asking you to marry me, Sirius,” Voldemort says, amused. “I am simply stating that I am going to make myself available to you, should you want it.”

Sirius’ first ridiculous thought is that no one ever came on to him quite so eloquently. The situation is simply too surreal for his mind to properly give it the gravitas it deserves.

Instead, it focuses on Voldemort making himself *available* to Sirius. Several images flash before him, one more filthy and depraved than the last-

Stay focused!

“I wear your mark,” Sirius makes himself say it, a last ditched effort his sanity is attempting in order to get him out of whatever this is. “You expect me to obey you. It can get messy.”

“I can see how that would be problematic.”

Sirius nods.

“With anyone else. But you don’t obey me.”

That’s not quite true; maybe Sirius isn’t obeying by Voldemort’s high standards. He doesn’t throw himself on his knees, he doesn’t ‘my lord’ Voldemort, nor does he cower in awe or fear, jumping to do his bidding.

But he does do what Voldemort asks him to do. He killed Parkinson, didn’t he?

That was more of a negotiation, for Regulus’ sake. Something inside him desperately wants to cling to the illusion that was somehow a fair exchange, that Sirius had a choice in it.

“When my Mark burns, you expect me to show up. I don’t have the option not to come.”

“I will never use the Mark for personal reasons. In fact, to even it out, I will let you initiate these sorts of encounters. I realise I am hard to approach, so I am giving you permission to do so.”

That irritates Sirius. He doesn’t need *permission* from Voldemort. He’s not a child or a pet to be allowed to do things. He didn’t need permission the first time, did he?

“Noted,” he says, primly. He downs the glass and stands.

Voldemort lets him go.

(-)

Lost in his head, he didn't realise when the room went silent, until he looks up from the spot he was staring at- a chipped corner of a coffee table- to see James and Lily exchanging worried glances.

"What?" he asks.

"Well," Lily says, standing. "You'll have to excuse me, Sirius. I'm rather tired. I think I'll go to bed."

It's a bit early for sleep, even by boring married couple standards, but Sirius stands as well. "I'll be off your hair-"

"No, no!" Both James and Lily protest, too fast. Sirius frowns.

"Keep James company, lest he gets bored and burns down the house, yes?" Lily asks, coming over and kissing Sirius's cheek. "Goodnight."

She pushes him back to the couch, and then she leaves, yawning. Lily has many talents, but she is not a good actor. That's the fakest yawn Sirius had ever witnessed.

"So, Padfoot. Now it's just us lads. Fancy a drink?"

Sirius holds up his wine goblet.

"None of that. Something stronger."

"I thought Lily was adamant I'm not to drink anything but wine in her house?"

"She's not here." James wiggles his eyebrows.

"You're weird!" Sirius accuses.

James' forced cheeriness melts. "I'm weird? Padfoot, you're so odd lately, so distant. Peter and I tried to talk to you several times, but you blew us off."

"Did I?" Sirius can't remember anything unusual about their last encounters. Then again, his mind often drifts these days.

"Yes. So, what's going on?"

Great. A casual Thursday evening interrogation.

Sirius sighs. "Just this spy shit. It's stressing me out."

James rubs his forehead. "It stresses *me* out, that you're out there."

"Well, there you go."

“But I think it’s more than that. When you’re stressed, you act out. Now you’re so withdrawn. Since Marlene, you… I just want to tell you, we’re here for you, ok? If you want to talk.”

Sirius nods, stiffening a little when Marlene is mentioned. He lights a cigarette, and it’s a testament to how worried they are for him that Lily doesn’t manifest down the stairs to yell at him to put it out, or that James doesn’t rush to open a window and try to block the door so Lily wouldn’t be able to smell it.

Sirius hates to have them this worried.

“I slept with a bloke.”

He doesn’t know why he says it. Perhaps because he’s dying to tell someone, perhaps because if he throws sex at James, he’ll forget about more dangerous things.

Perhaps he wants to see how James reacts to this piece of news, because Sirius never told any of them about that side of him.

James’ eyes widen comically. “Peter did warn us you’ll run out of women and will be forced to switch to men,” he says, bewildered.

But there’s no judgment there, just surprise. Of course, Sirius knew there would be no judgement- it’s only in his head, in his family, obsessed with heirs and lineage and duty. Still, it relaxes something inside him.

“How did this come about? Do I know him? Do you like blokes now? Should I divorce Lily and elope with you?”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Pack up, Prongs. I’ll take you to Bahamas for our honeymoon.”

James grins at him. “Well, alright. So you slept with a guy- why the moodiness?”

Sirius takes a long drag out of his fag. So many reasons for the ‘moodiness’. “He’s one of *them*,” he says, after a bit of consideration.

“Ah.” James becomes serious. “Who?”

“His identity is secret.” And it is, in a way. No one knows about Tom Riddle. Sirius feels awful lying to James straight to his face, so he finds these half truths. “I can’t tell you.”

“Alright.” James understands Sirius can’t speak about everything he knows or sees as a Death Eater. Dumbledore’s orders. He frowns. “Well, you’ve slept with shitty people before. Not like this would be a first. “

“Yeah,” Sirius agrees.

He lies down on the couch, closing his eyes. His mind is a whirlwind of emotions he can’t make his way through.

As always, James is there to clear the way.

“You like him!” He sounds surprised. “It wasn’t just sex.”

Sirius’ hearts thuds. *Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.* “Yeah, I suppose I do.” It brings a little relief to admit it to himself. And a lot of dread, too.

“Perhaps he’s not that awful, then. The fact that he has your interest, besides sex, is quite a rare feat. There must be hope for him-”

“He *is* awful.” Or at least, awful by good people’s standards. Sirius’ moral compass had always been wonky. Now it’s downright out of order. “He’s very committed to the cause.”

“What-how-what is it about him that you like, then?” James asks, after a few seconds.

There’s a lot. Some, he can’t say to James. James would never understand being attracted to someone because they’re powerful. Or wanting to fuck someone so powerful because it makes Sirius feel more powerful himself. James wouldn’t understand Sirius feels safe with Voldemort in a way he hadn’t felt since his father died. Perhaps not exactly safe- just- he feels less burdened. “He’s intelligent. Can hold a bloody proper conversation. Challenges me, you know? Knows some much shit, about everything. I don’t know. He gets me. He really gets me and that’s rare. I feel like he knows me.”

“You never give people a chance to know you, though. Many would understand you better, if you’d just open up, but you always avoid that-”

“I know. Listen, I know. But I can’t really avoid him so…even Marlene. I-she knew me better than most, but she didn’t, not really. Because I couldn’t...” He sighs. But he doesn’t need to find the right words. James understands what Sirius means. He knows Sirius doesn’t really talk about himself, about feelings, about anything too personal. “But he sees right through me. Even if I don’t say anything or- he just sees everything. Even the darker parts of me,” he adds, after some seconds, turning his head and opening his eyes, to gauge James’ reaction.

James stays silent for a handful of moments. He takes off his glasses, wipes them on his robe, before putting them back on.

“Lily said something to me a few months ago. I was upset about a comment Remus made. He said you are cruel and I just -well, we got into a fight.”

Sirius bites his lip. “I am cruel,” he says, softly.

“No. You *can* be cruel- there’s a big difference between the two. Anyway, Lily told me I’m not a good friend to you.”

That’s the most ridiculous thing Sirius had heard in a long time. James is *too good* of a friend. Sirius doesn’t deserve him. “She’s bonkers.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said at first.” James shrugs, and he looks away from Sirius. “But she insisted that I ignore parts of you. That I don’t want to accept them and that you feel it and

you can be hurt by it. I didn't believe her but-but yeah. Maybe I do. And I'm sorry, if I ever made you feel like you can't tell me stuff because I wouldn't agree or-"

Sirius sits, puts out his cigarette. "Shut up. Never fucking say sorry to me. You're the best friend in the world, James."

"I just want to say that I am here, mate. I don't want you to feel that I don't accept you, or that this bloke is the only one to see you-I mean, clearly, I don't know the guy, but I've known you for ten years now."

"Sometimes I don't know myself anymore," Sirius says, cutting over James. "With all this shit; Dumbledore, Voldemort, right and evil and -I feel like I'm losing it, a little."

There. He said it. He said it to *James*.

"You're Sirius. You're a marauder, prankster extraordinaire. You're that guy that always helped when you could help. You make people laugh and you don't care about anyone's background if they're decent people. You give anyone a chance. Don't you dare let the Death Eaters or Voldemort or this guy get to you! That's who you are. The man that left his house, his money and title, because you didn't agree with the way your family saw the word."

If only.

"I'm also that guy who tried to murder a schoolmate, via my best friend," Sirius reminds him.

James wrinkles his nose. "You were young and stupid. You grew up."

"You were sixteen too. You knew it was wrong. You went there and almost died to save Snape. I didn't care. Even now, years after, I only care because it would have hurt Remus. Snape-no. I don't. I know it was wrong, but I don't give a shit."

It feels so freeing to say it. He pretended he was sorry for the rest of his time at Hogwarts, he lied to James that he was sorry, begged his forgiveness. Never Remus', though, because Sirius was only sorry James stopped talking to him, and he only ever intended to solve that problem.

James shakes his head. He stands. "You have to stop. You have to tell Dumbledore you want out. This isn't good for you, Sirius. At all."

"I'm talking with mum again," Sirius says, apparently determined to get everything off his chest. "I'm going over for dinner every now and again."

James stares at him, mouth agape. "Oh, Sirius-"

"And I was talking to this guy, and he told me I am just like the rest of my family. That I look down on werewolves, I think they're animals and they deserve to rot away. I only make an exception for Remus-"

"You don't think that!" James says, voice raised. "Sirius, come on-"

“I don’t know. I don’t know anymore. I might think like that, actually.”

“Fuck. That’s it. I’m talking to Dumbledore.” James starts pacing.

Sirius stands, too.“Talk away. He won’t care. He doesn’t care about me. He only cares about Voldemort and he’s willing to sacrifice us all if it means getting rid of him. Especially me, Black sheep that I am.”

James shakes his head. “Listen, I know Dumbledore is not all peaches and flowers, ok? But he does care about you. He cares about us. To think he doesn’t is dangerous, and untrue.”

“I don’t like him,” Sirius says, childish.

“Sometimes I don’t like him either. But I trust him. I do. He has our best interest at heart.”

Sirius snorts.

“I’ll talk to him. You need to step back. I knew it was a bad idea to send you there, that it will mess with your head-”

“I don’t want you to talk to him. I can’t just hand in my resignation to Voldemort, in any case. I’m in it now. He won’t- he won’t let me go. “

“We’ll hide you.”

Sirius laughs. ”Yeah, right. That will work. You can’t hide from Voldemort.”

“Of course you can. We’ll do the Fidelius. I’ll be the secret keeper and-“

“Never. Fucking *never*. I’ll never put you in that position. Everybody knows we’re best mates. He’ll come for you in a second. No, James. I’m there to stay until I die, or he dies.”

And Voldemort won’t be doing any dying.

“I won’t let you die, you hear me?” James comes closer, clasps his hand on Sirius’ shoulder. “You can’t die on me. You just can’t! We’ll think it through and -”

Sirius makes a frustrated sound, shrugs James’ hand off. This is why he doesn’t talk abut himself. Because he’s a fucking mess. “Forget it. I’m just being dramatic. It’s not that bad. It’s just this thing with this guy. Confused me a little.”

“Sirius-”

“It’s fine. I just got away in my head for a bit. I’m fine. I can do this.” He feels so guilty for that stricken look on James’s face. “Hey! I’m fine, alright? It’s just this, trust me. Well, and Marlene, of course. I’m in a bad place, but I’ll be fine.”

“You’re doing it again. You just opened up and now you’re running away, closing off!”

“I promise, I’m not.”

James doesn't believe him.

(-)

He feels Bella's arms around him, and he clings to her, hiding his head in her chest.

He knows something is off, he knows it is not really her, but he pretends she is, because he *needs* her.

"You know I like him, but he can't show up in this state and pass out in the garden! Dora found him, for God's sake, that's not-"

"Get out, Ted."

Her voiced is more like Bella's than ever, when she uses that sharp tone.

Sirius doesn't let her go.

She sings to him, just as Bella used to do for all of them, an old lullaby he liked as a kid, her fingers running through his hair.

Sirius clings tighter, tighter, until her voice sounds breathless. She keeps singing, however, and eventually he falls asleep.

When he wakes up, the sun shines brightly through the window.

She's sitting at his side, in her modest bed, modest bedroom, modest house.

She's holding his left arm; she unrolled the sleeves, and the Dark Mark sits there proudly, snake slithering through the skull in a never ending motion.

"Why?" she asks, when she realises he's awake, even though she doesn't look away from the mark.

He never really answered that question for himself. Why did he agree to Dumbledore's plan?

It was a desire to be close to Bella, a desire to do something important. Fear that he would die if he didn't take it.

But, deep down, he thinks it was just *because*. He wanted violence, he wanted to be bad, he was curious, drawn to Voldemort's dark aura, since the second he laid eyes on him, sitting in Sirius' armchair.

"Because it's in our blood," he says. And by *it*, he means dark magic. He means a desire to fight, in perpetuity, a craving for violence.

She flinches and lets go of his arm.

Sirius pulls the sleeve back over it; as soon as he does and the Mark disappears under his sweater, he realises he took comfort in looking at it, just seconds ago. In that moving snake, a figment of Voldemort's magic running through Sirius' body, binding and potent, reminding Sirius he's not alone, no matter how lonely he feels.

"I hoped at least you would escape that fate," Andromeda says.

She knows about Bellatrix' Mark, clearly; she must have seen it before she ran away. Bellatrix never kept secrets from her sisters.

She must know about Lucius' Mark, too; perhaps that is why she ran, because she didn't want to marry a Death Eater.

The door bursts open, a small blur of jet black hair, so fast Sirius barely has the time to sit on his pillow before Dora's skinny arms go around his neck.

Andromeda flinches again. She doesn't like it when Dora shifts her hair to black, to mirror Sirius'.

She already looks like Bellatrix enough; the black hair only enhances that resemblance.

"You fell asleep in our garden, silly!" she tells Sirius. "I found you in the bushes when I went to get the papers!"

"That's because I ignored my bedtime," Sirius says and he finds it in himself to offer her a smile. "That's why we go to sleep early, kiddo, so we don't fall asleep in people's gardens."

She giggles, but her face turns serious, fast. She sits on his chest, puts a hand on his cheek.

"I'm sorry about Marlene, Sirius. She was wicked cool! I liked her."

Sirius swallows, but he somehow keeps his smile. "I know you did."

They only met each other a couple of times. Andromeda did not approve of Marlene, and her brash attitude, her too short skirts and forever smudged eyeliner.

"When I grow up, I'll be a fighter, too! I will be an Auror so I can arrest these bad people that hurt her and her family."

"Don't say that!" Andromeda demands, voice shrill and very alike Sirius' mother. Sirius looks up to see the fear in her eyes. "I told you to stop with that nonsense! Girls don't fight."

Dora jumps off Sirius to glare at her mother. "Yes, they do! There are girl Aurors! Marlene fought-"

"And they die," Andromeda says, sharply. "Go to your room! Now! Take off those ugly trousers and put on a dress!"

Dora leaves as fast as she came in, slamming the door behind her.

“Huh,” Sirius says, into the silence, the innate cruelty he was born with rearing its ugly head. “And you think you escaped us, Andromeda?” he laughs. “You didn’t. It’s in your blood, too, darling. None of us should be parents, clearly.”

Before Andromeda can say anything, the door opens again, and there is Ted, drawn by the noise.

“Everything alright?”

Sirius gets out of the bed. “I’lm leaving,” he says.

“Sirius, listen. I know you are going through a rough time, but you can’t come here drunk. We have little Dora to think-”

“Yes, of course. I understand. It won’t happen again.” *Sorry*, he means to stay, but as always, it gets stuck in his throat.

He takes his jacket from the chair Andromeda hung it on.

“Thank you for looking after me,” he says. “I’ll go to the loo and then fuck off.”

“Don’t come here again!” Andromeda demands, anger in every syllable. “I don’t want you around my daughter.”

Sirius is already leaving the bedroom, and he doesn’t turn around.

“Andy!” Ted sounds shocked. “Come on, it wasn’t nice of him to come here wasted, but you’re taking it too far.”

Sirius heads left to the bathroom, but passes by it, sneaking into Dora’s room instead.

She’s on the floor, crying, many dresses lying around her. She’s busy ripping them to pieces.

Sirius sits by her, takes her hands in his. Her hair is back to her natural light brown, a mix of Andromeda’s and Ted’s.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” he says, and it’s easy to say sorry around *her*.

“I hate her, sometimes,” Dora hiccups. “She can be so mean when she gets angry.”

“She loves you very much, you know that, right? She’s just afraid. Aurors have a dangerous job. Don’t say that around her.”

Of course, Andromeda isn’t just worried about that. Dora is so young, there will be many, *many* years before she can even become an Auror, if she’ll even want to be one by that point.

But, once, Andromeda knew another girl that yelled she will be an Auror, or a dragon handler, or a curse breaker. A girl that didn’t want to wear dresses, even if she liked them, stealing her father’s pants and parading around in them, crying she wants duel lessons, not dance lessons.

“Don’t mind her when she loses her temper,” Sirius advises. “I know it’s not your fault, but your mum gets sad sometimes. And sad people say hurtful things.”

“I thought Blacks don’t get sad,” Dora counters, throwing his own words back into his face.

Clever little devil. Sirius smiles at her. “We can be sad; but only around family.” He gathers her to his chest. She comes easily, crying in his hair. “But you know what Blacks don’t do? They don’t cry. Blacks are strong, kid. Almost gods. Have you heard of gods crying?”

“I’m no Black.”

He cups her head, drawing it back so he can look into her eyes.

“You are. I don’t care what your name is, what your mother or father say. You are one of mine. You always will be.”

She bites her cheek. “Some old lady sneered at me and daddy when we went to Gringotts last week. She whispered to her friend that daddy is a mudblood and I am a half-blood.”

“Don’t say mudblood,” he says, instinctively. James chided him so many times in their first year at school, it’s branded into his mind. “And next time someone calls you a half-blood, stroll up to them and tell them your mother is Andromeda Black. Tell them a single drop of Black blood is worth more than whatever they have in their worthless veins, yeah? And then ask for their names, and send me an owl. I’ll make sure they swallow their words.”

Dora giggles. She smiles up at him, and her hair turns jet black. “You’re the best, Sirius! You’re my favourite cousin!”

“Of course I am.” Her other cousins, the ones she met at least, are all boring muggles that don’t know what to make of her and her ever changing features. “Now, I have to go, because your mum is really upset with me and I don’t want to lose my head.”

She giggles again. “She’s not that bad, Sirius! Don’t be silly! She just says bad things sometimes, but she wouldn’t hurt you.”

“I know.” He kisses her head, gets her off his lap and stands. “See you around, kiddo.”

(-)

On Tuesday, Sirius gets mildly drunk and Apparates to Voldemort’s house, though they haven’t met on Tuesdays since that night.

Since you fucked him, a voice supplies, unhelpful.

Apparently, he was serious when he said he won’t use the mark for personal reasons. He probably judges their duels, their dinners, the piano as personal.

Well, they are. They always were personal, weren't they?

Be that as it may, it isn't fair. Voldemort can't take Tuesdays away from Sirius. It's the only thing that keeps him afloat. Knowing he would see Voldemort every week, bask in his menacing, dark aura and get to duel had been the highlight of Sirius' weeks, for a long time.

Does he know that? Does he know I can't give that up?

Sirius hadn't even realised how much these meetings meant to him, until they were taken away.

Voldemort isn't home, apparently. Sirius shoves the jealousy away- Tuesdays are supposed to be *his*- and prepares himself for pain as he reaches out and tries to turn the doorknob.

"Ouch," he mutters, as he's thrown away by a magical blast. He rubs the back of his head and stands back up.

The wards should alert Voldemort someone is trying to break into his house.

Indeed, Sirius is still rubbing at his head when Voldemort materialises beside him, in that quiet way of his.

"It's Tuesday," Sirius snarls at him.

Voldemort smiles, a smug look about him.

Don't punch him. Don't punch him.

"How drunk are you?" he asks, but that's the thing about him- he never sounds judging. He never hounds Sirius about his drinking, as Dumbledore or everyone else does.

"No more drunk than usual," Sirius says, though he never showed up drunk for their duels before. "I need to learn how to duel in this state, since I usually get in trouble while plastered, anyway."

"Irrefutable logic," Voldemort says, still wearing a shadow of a smile on his face.

(-)

Turns out Sirius fights better when he's drunk. He'd known already, from his many pub fights, but those were against stupid, irrelevant people.

He did not expect he'd fair better with Voldemort while drunk rather than sober, but he does.

Of course, it doesn't mean anything in the end, he still ends up losing his wand, but he lasts longer, the firewhiskey making the small injuries he acquires hurt less. The firewhsikey also

decimates the advice he got from his tutors in the past, floating around in his head. He's all instinct. He actually singes Voldemort's robe in two places.

He already feels better than he had in the past three weeks, more relaxed, as if he *fits* into his body, and it's not just a stranger to him.

"See you next Tuesday," he says, with confidence he doesn't really feel, when Voldemort gives him back his wand.

He Apparates away before he can get an answer.

He goes to his house and lies down on the new mattress. He's bleeding slightly, from some scratches, but he knows they are minor- Voldemort hadn't hurt him enough to have to heal Sirius in a long time.

For the first time since Marlene died, he sleeps through the night without needing any potion or extra alcohol.

(-)

Sirius refuses to attend Lucius' birthday party, throwing away the formal invitation.

But there's another one, a note from Lucius asking him to join him and a few others for a drink the night before the party.

"Just us men," he makes sure to mention, no doubt intending to assure Sirius Bellatrix won't be there.

"Will Regulus show up?" Sirius asks, head stuck in the fireplace, looking into Lucius' office.

Lucius walks closer to the fireplace.

"No. He'll be at the grand party, but not to our get together before that. I invited our lord to that one, and I have been told Regulus is not to be around him, if it is avoidable."

Voldemort must have told him that. Ordered his men to keep Regulus away from him. Because Sirius asked him to.

He bites his lip.

"Does he come to these sort of things, usually?" Sirius asks.

Lucius shrugs. "Sometimes, for the most important of us. But it's never guaranteed."

"Is Dolohov coming?" Sirius growls.

"No. Of course not." A muscle jumps in Lucius' jaw. "Not after what he did."

Sirius agrees to attend.

(-)

He spends a long time dressing, sorting through his new clothes. He ended up burning his old ones, since half of the expensive robes and accessories were from Bellatrix. The other half were clothes he wore around Marlene. Every time he'd pick a T-shirt, he'd be reminded of a concert that he went to with her, or when they'd fuck and she'd take his clothes off, or that she washed his clothes- he got rid of all of them, and bought new things.

He picks the most muggle attire possible, just to piss off Rodolphus. Tight, black jeans, a Black Sabbath T-shirt, and a Harley Davidson leather jacket. The only thing magical are his dragon hide boots.

Is this also to piss off Rodolphus? a sarcastic voice asks when Sirius spends a *long* time braiding his hair in a complicated style he once saw in a magazine.

He sings along with a new vinyl he's procured, loud enough to cover the voice laughing at him in his head.

When he Apparates in Malfoy's holiday house, no one comments on his attire.

Only smiles greet him.

It's Lucius' birthday, but Avery, Rabastan, Yaxley and Lucius himself all go out of their way to be nice to Sirius.

Even Rodolphus, in his own way. He isn't *nice*- he doesn't know how to be nice- but he keeps his distance and makes no sarcastic remarks.

"I am disappointed," Sirius says, when he sits down and the best whiskey in Europe appears in a glass in front of him. "Where is Snape? Isn't he a close enough friend of yours to merit an invitation? I'm just *dying* to see him."

Lucius rolls his eyes. "That's precisely why he isn't here."

"A pity." Sirius would like nothing more than to bully Snape until the overgrown bat decides he's better off dead.

"A pity, indeed," Rabastan grins, seated across from Sirius. "I thoroughly enjoy taking the piss out of him. You should see how Rodolphus picks on him."

Sirius can imagine. Lucius might make allowances for half-bloods, Avery had been Snape class-mate, but the Lestranges? Yeah, no way they'll act nice with a half-blood that dares presume to infiltrate their circles.

“Arseholes,” Avery mutters. “The whole lot of you.”

“Since Snape is not here, do you want us to make fun of you, instead?” Rabastan barks at him. “Tell me, how is your new wife? Have you figured out where to stick your cock yet?”

Sirius relaxes, as the minutes go by, falls back into old banter, old patterns from his childhood.

And it’s so refreshing not having to censor himself, not to be on high alert for anything unsavoury that might come out of his mouth, the way he is when James is around.

And if he keeps eyeing the door, once in a while- well, what of it?

Two hours later, Voldemort shows up.

“My Lord, what an honour.” Lucius stands, immediately taking control of his features.

The relaxed, drunken atmosphere is sucked out of the room in the blink of an eye. Avery almost falls off his chair.

“May I get you something to drink?” Lucius asks, as Voldemort sits right next to Sirius.

He nods, and Rabastan hurries to serve him some scotch.

Everyone at the table is so silent. Laughter bubbles up in Sirius’ chest, but for once, he manages to hold it in.

“Don’t let me interrupt your fun,” Voldemort says, after some seconds.

It’s quite hard for anyone to have fun with Voldemort looming around.

Avery and Rabastan seem desperately uncomfortable. They turn to look at Sirius and Lucius, begging with their eyes for someone to do something.

“Sirius was telling us about his enchanted bike,” Lucius says, smoothly, raising his eyebrow at Sirius, throwing him the imaginary ball, in a game called ‘keep Voldemort entertained’.

Rodolphus snorts, further away.

In reality, before Voldemort interrupted them, Rabastan was describing, in *explicit* detail, a night he spent with twin sisters, in Bulgaria.

“Right.” Sirius smiles. “Well, I was saying I fucked up the invisibility charm, when I first attempted it.”

Lucius cringes before ‘fucked’ is even out of Sirius’ mouth, but Voldemort doesn’t react, so Lucius calms down. “A couple of muggles saw me flying about. Made quite the ruckus. I ended up arrested, the Aurors were quite pissed. But they let me out after a few hours, with a fine and a warning.”

“Lucky,” Rabastan exclaims; he’d said the same thing, first time he heard the story, an hour before.

“Yeah, really lucky,” Avery pipes in, recreating the conversation.

“Why a motorbike?” Voldemort asks. “We have brooms.”

Sirius shrugs. “Doesn’t compare. I can ride this one on the pavement, on muggle highways. It’s nice. But then I can fly it, too, if I’m in a hurry.”

“I wish you’d stop with this muggle obsession,” Rodolphus says. “You don’t need a muggle vehicle.”

Sirius makes a face at him. “I don’t need it. I want it. It’s fun. You should try it, maybe it will loosen that stick you’ve got lodged in your arse.”

Rodolphus opens his mouth, but Voldemort cuts over him.

“Did your father tell you about his youthful fascination with german war planes, Lucius?”

Lucius does a double take. “No, he certainly did not mention it.”

Voldemort tells the story and soon, the atmosphere relaxes, somewhat. Rabastan laughs a little too sharply, when laughter seems appropriate. Yaxley looks far more interested than he usually is, and there are no crude interruption, but other than that, the Death Eaters are put at ease in no time. Voldemort knows how to make himself less threatening when he puts his mind to it.

As they drink, more and more, Rodolphus complains about his wife; apparently they’re in a massive fight, and she threw him out of the Manor.

Lucius says Narcissa is pregnant.

Yaxley hounds Rabastan about when he’s planning to get married and carry on the Lestrange name.

That’s how they end up back to the Bulgarian twins story, though a much more censured version of it.

Voldemort tells them about a warlock he met in Bulgaria, who was raising a small army of Veelas, which prompts Lucius to admit he wouldn’t mind having a few Veelas at his disposal.

Sirius reminds him of the time they went to Greece, when Sirius had been eight and Lucius fourteen and he’d made a fool of himself fallowing a part Veela around all night, until Abraxas sent him to his room.

That leads them to Greek news, where there are rumours of a dark lord trying to take over the country.

There’s a debate, after, with slurred arguments.

Voldemort had stopped talking for a while, choosing to *stare* at Sirius instead.

Rodolphus and Yaxley get into a quarrel over the merits of brute force over strategy. Yaxley must have had too much to drink, because he's riling Rodolphus up, and that's never a wise decision, Sirius can attest to it from personal experience.

Voldemort stands, and just like that, everyone stops talking.

"I'll retire for the night," he declares. "Happy birthday, Lucius. May you have a productive year."

The Death Eaters stand and try to bow or kneel, some more successful than others in that inebriated state.

Voldemort pays them no mind, already heading to the door.

"Don't let these two duel again," he tells Lucius, nodding between Rodolphus and Yaxley.

And then his eyes move to Sirius. He holds his gaze for what feels like an eternity. When he finally looks away and leaves, Sirius shivers.

Seconds later, Rodolphus punches Yaxley, taking Sirius out of a sudden fantasy where all the Death Eaters were gone, and Voldemort remained-

Rabastan is fighting with Avery now, who tried to help Yaxley.

Lucius and Sirius break them apart, with great difficulty. They are lucky Rodolphus is so drunk, or they'd end up in the hospital probably.

"I'll take him home, " Lucius sighs, holding on to an unconscious Rodolphus.

"No, not home," Rabastan says, nursing a split lip, holding his right side. "Bella will kill him if she sees him. We'll sleep here, if you don't mind."

"I'll be on my way," Sirius says, bending to make sure Yaxley is still breathing, where he fell to the floor. Avery helps him carry the man to a nearby couch. "Tell Cissa I'm happy for her. And for you, of course. Congratulations, Lucius."

Lucius nods, a rare genuine smile spreading on his face. "Come by the Manor, next week. Pretend you're surprised at the news. She wanted to tell you herself."

When Sirius gets out of the house, he takes a moment to breathe. He can feel the stars above him, but he won't look up.

He makes his decision.

(-)

He finds Voldemort seated on his unassuming couch.

He's been waiting for me.

Sirius is drunk enough not to hesitate or second guess himself. He knows why he came here. So he takes out his jacket, slowly.

Voldemort watches him, in complete silence. Sirius folds his jacket, places it neatly on a chair, and moves into the bedroom.

Voldemort follows, a shadow at Sirius' back.

Bad idea to turn your back to him, an instinct warns him. Sirius snorts; as if facing him would make much of a difference if Voldemort wanted to attack him.

But he does turn, because it's easier to face Voldemort than the bed.

Just in time to see Voldemort take out his wand. Sirius will never manage to stop his pulse from shooting up when that wand is between long, pale fingers.

The fireplace roars to life. Voldemort places the wand on the mantlepiece but waits beside it, until Sirius understands and takes out his own wand, walks closer and places it right next to Voldemort's.

They both step away from the fireplace, deliberately.

Sirius had not thought about wands and being disarmed, that night. And, apparently, neither had Voldemort.

Sirius had ripped off his clock, with the wand inside, away from Voldemort, effectively depriving him of his weapon, leaving him- for once- vulnerable, and Voldemort had been too- something to notice or care.

Perhaps nervous. It brings a pang of pleasure, thinking he made the dark lord nervous. Sirius' cock is already hardening, just thinking about it.

Well, it was already hard to begin with, ever since he took the decision to Apparate here instead of anywhere else in the country.

Voldemort looks at Sirius, expectingly, and the pleasure just intensifies, because Sirius gets to dictate this. It's not like he knows what to do with a man more than Voldemort knows, but Sirius at least is experienced in sex, of whatever kind.

He pulls off his T-shirt, in a practiced move, lets it fall somewhere on the floor.

Voldemort *watches*. Sirius is suddenly reminded of the night he killed Parkinson. How Voldemort's eyes went up and down Sirius' body. Sirius had thought it was displeasure at his choice of muggle clothes, but it hadn't been.

There were, in fact, many occasions in which Voldemort's eyes wondered.

Sirius is so used to being ogled that he dismissed it. There was no awed expression on Voldemort's face, no simpering smiles, no winks or giggles, or anything that usually accompanies the stares Sirius gets.

Even now, he seems… inquisitive. Curious.

His eyes stop on Sirius' hip and side where the phoenix tattoo used to be, but they don't linger for more than a second.

He takes off his robe. It floats itself into the dresser.

Clearly, he doesn't need a wand. Neither does Sirius. But, of course, it's one thing to do wandless magic for simple things like that, and quite another to cast curses, so Sirius is still reassured their wands are away from them.

There's something about his pressed, crisp white shirt that sends a throb of want through Sirius.

He certainly enjoys male bodies when clad in tight T-shirts or tight jeans- but nothing beats a proper suit.

Sirius stalks closer. This way, the slight height difference is less notable. And the closer they are, the more pronounced is the weight difference.

Sirius will never stop being surprised by how narrow Voldemort is, how Sirius' frame swallows him up.

Voldemort waits, passive, and it drives Sirius mad with lust. This man that can reduce a room to silence just with his presence; that has an entire nation terrorised, so afraid they don't even dare to speak his name. And there he is, unsure of how to deal with Sirius.

You moron, he knows how to deal with you better than you know yourself, a voice cautions, but Sirius wants his nice power fantasy, so he banishes the thought away.

He reaches over, refusing to hesitate, to be intimidated. He starts unbuttoning the shirt.

Gods, how long I've been waiting for this. To be able to take his time with a man, undress and study a male body, in a space bigger than a bathroom stall, with no muggles around, no blaring music to drown out his mother's disgust with him.

Strangely, at the moment, there's no trace of his mother's scorn in his head.

Blessedly silent.

"Still not mining the touching part?" he almost asks because he should. Voldemort might be whoever he wants, a dark lord, a murderer and what not, but Sirius crossed many lines, last he did this. In the end, he asks no such thing.

If Voldemort wants Sirius to stop or takes umbrage to his touch, he's more than capable to express himself.

Sirius doesn't need to be considerate.

Even putting aside Voldemort's magical skill and his dark lord status- he has three decades over Sirius. He doesn't need Sirius to hold his hand and utter silly reassurances.

It's why Sirius always preferred older partners; he doesn't need to play the gentleman with them

Of course, he doesn't think he ever slept with someone as old as Voldemort, though there was that foreign, incredibly attractive witch the past spring, that could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty- the one that prompted Lily to declare Sirius definitely has mummy issues.

Once the shirt is out of the way, Sirius forgets what he's doing for a second, distracted by the runes and scars. They contrast sharply with Voldemort's narrow, almost starved frame. His body might deceptively appear frail, but the runes, the scars- they show he is the furthest thing from it. He's made of sharp angles, hipbones and ribs jutting out from underneath the skin, not an ounce of fat on him. Yet he's not *soft*. His muscles aren't defined like Sirius', but every one of them is hard under Sirius' touch. Unrelenting. One on his side jumps under Sirius' fingers.

Is the dark lord ticklish?

Sirius laughs at the absurd notion. Then he spends a moment imagining Voldemort laugh. Not a cruel laugh, not necessarily amused- just a pure, joyous laugh. Is he capable of that?

Then Sirius imagines what Voldemort would look like if he wasn't born an orphan; if he were to have been born into a Sacred, rich family, with plenty to eat, with the sports that come associated with socialising with his peers since a young age.

He'd be larger, Sirius knows. He'd be quite formidable looking, what with his height and Tom Riddle's striking features.

But no, Voldemort must have spent his time reading, not playing Quidditch or other games.

Reading, and *duelling*, Sirius rectifies, when his hands rest on Voldemort's back. His spine is protruding, sharp ridges all along its length, but the muscles holding it straight are hard, too.

That's how one recognises an accomplished duellist. They tend to be fit, all that twisting and turning, lightning fast moves to evade curses.

Voldemort's cool fingers come to grip Sirius' shoulders. He seems unsure what to do with them, simply rests them there.

Sirius suppresses a shiver, but he definitely feels it going down his back, straight to his cock.

Voldemort figures out what he wants to do, and he pulls Sirius closer, kissing him.

If the rest of his body is always a touch colder than it should be, his mouth isn't.

Hot, eager. Hungry.

Sirius immediately feels threatened by this newfound confidence, so he grabs Voldemort's jaw and takes control of the kiss.

A part of him tries to imagine this isn't Voldemort; if he were any other man, it would be easier to deal with him.

Yet if he were any other man, Sirius wouldn't want him so badly. If he were any other man, Sirius wouldn't thrill at having someone so powerful, so unique, bending to his will.

Because Voldemort lets Sirius take control of the kiss, after a few seconds.

That's better. It puts Sirius at ease.

He doesn't part from Voldemort's mouth, reaching between them to undo the zipper of his jeans. As he does it, his knuckles brush against Voldemort's trousers and the hardness he finds there.

Every other thought leaves his mind, replaced with a burning desire to see Voldemort's cock, feel its weight in his hand.

Losing patience, he banishes his too-tight jeans to the floor- would be a hassle to get out of them otherwise.

Voldemort's trousers vanish, too, though by his own will and magic.

Sirius remembers when he first saw Voldemort's black pants in the dresser, neatly arranged in a drawer. He thought them boring then. But now, when he steps back, and he looks down-

Nothing boring about the pants. Especially not with the bulge stretching them.

Voldemort himself looks down at Sirius- an eyebrow raises above now too dark eyes, his pupils blow with arousal, eating at the usual red.

"No pants?" he asks, and he manages to sound amused, and level-headed as always, not even a touch of breathlessness to his voice, even if Sirius made sure he couldn't breathe properly for a while, as they kissed.

"You can't wear pants with jeans as tight as those," Sirius explains. Would ruin the aesthetic.

"Who did that?" Voldemort's gaze shifted to a long, jagged scar that dominates most of Sirius' right thigh.

"He was masked, but I'm pretty sure it was Rowle. My first battle."

Sirius remembers the thrill of that first battle, of first blood, of real danger and death and pain in the air.

He feels almost the same now; the first taste of something dangerous, new and forbidden.

“Whoever healed you deserves to be decapitated,” Voldemort says, voice lower now.

“No one did. I just let it heal on its own,” Sirius informs him. “Who did that?” He nods to a straight scar, crossing over Voldemort’s hipbone. It looks like a cutting curse. Sirius has an almost identical one on his right shoulder blade.

He’s suddenly raging with jealousy. How come someone was able to hurt this man that defeats Sirius so easily?

“A White Witch, in Russia.”

His legs are more sinewy than Sirius would have imagined, judging by the rest of him. As long and thin as the rest of him, but he can see the definition to them.

“What, the one that is still alive now? The famous one?” he asks, bewildered, and his fingers go to Voldemort’s waist, skirting on the edge of his pants.

“The very same.”

“You couldn’t kill her?” Sirius tests the waters, slips his fingers under the band.

He feels Voldemort’s lower abdomen tense.

“I was twenty-three,” Voldemort sounds distracted now. “Tried to steal from her temple-” The rest of his sentence dies away when Sirius’ fingers wrap around him.

His cock is as hot as his mouth, Sirius discovers. Fatter than the rest of him, but just as long. *Of course he has a big cock.*

Everything else flies out of Sirius’ head. Any sort of caution, gone. All that matters now is that cock. And his own.

In a matter of seconds, he manoeuvres Voldemort towards the bed, pushes him on it. Sirius climbs over him, claims that mouth with another kiss.

They’re almost just as tall, just as long legged, and their erections line against each other, which is a new feeling for Sirius, but very pleasant.

He thrusts, experimentally. Voldemort stops kissing back, but otherwise doesn’t show any response. Sirius lets go of his mouth, draws back a little to see his face and thrusts again.

Voldemort swallows, his Adam’s apple bobs in a pronounced way as he stares at Sirius. His eyes glow like embers. They’re mostly black now, pupils blown wide. But they still have that insane focus and cleverness shining within.

His pants disappear, and Sirius isn’t sure if he was the one to will it, or Voldemort himself.

Without the material in the way, it feels even better when their cocks slide against each other.

Gods, I can't believe I deprived myself of this for so many years.

And Voldemort… he's been depriving himself for even more years.

"You must have found people attractive, even if you didn't act on it," Sirius whispers, twisting his neck so he can see their cocks better.

And what a sight it is.

"Men or women? Or both?" Sirius asks, and he's proud that his voice comes out steady.

"Men." A short pause. "I think." His voice is definitely clipped.

No wonder Voldemort became such a great wizard. Dumbledore too. That one is probably another virgin.

Both these men grew so powerful because they didn't waste any time on romance or sex or any other distractions, did they?

Sirius kisses him, but Voldemort is too distracted by the way Sirius thrusts against him to be able to participate much in the kiss.

Sirius remembers it happening to him, his first time having sex, getting far too fixated on one sensation to be able to multitask.

It's *sweet* in a way. Almost innocent. Reminds him of himself and Mary, fumbling in the dark, with no clue what the fuck they were doing, figuring out what goes where.

Of course, Mary had trembled in his arms, had shed a few tears when he first entered her, far too fast, and he'd kissed her tears away as she clung to his shoulders. That's not going to happen with Voldemort. At least Sirius hopes not. Voldemort bursting into tears would be too much.

Sirius uses a knee to nudge those slender legs apart, and Voldemort lets him. Each time Voldemort gives in, in any small way, it sends Sirius on a power trip.

He straightens, kneeling between Voldemort's legs. "I do need my wand for a second," he says. His voice isn't steady anymore. He's losing focus.

"For?" Voldemort must lose focus, too, because he's not usually monosyllabic.

"Lubrication spell."

It must dawn on Voldemort the practical uses for such a spell, because he extends his hand and the yew wand comes to it, immediately. "Use mine."

Isn't he paranoid? Voldemort is still cautious, even lying under Sirius. After all, Sirius would be foolish to try to hurt a man with his own wand. Suicide mission, really.

Rolling his eyes, Sirius takes the wand.

The rush of power that travels up his arm is unexpected. And the pull, the pull to dark magic- the wand hums with it, and it makes Sirius consider how much pain and death this wand had dealt.

He's a very sick man, it turns out, because his cock gives a twitch at the sensation.

"Yours suits me, too," Voldemort says, watching Sirius with hungry eyes.

The yew is a good fit for Sirius. He doesn't want to know what that says about him.

Sirius performs the charm on his left hand. He'd made use of muggle lubrication in the past, but it has nothing on magical one.

He wraps his now slick fingers around Voldemort's cock. Long, and thick, and just as proud as its owner.

Out of a deeply ingrained habit, Sirius performs the contraception charm.

Which is hilarious.

He's long since moved past saying spells aloud, especially this one, whom he has to cast on muggles, as unobtrusively as possible. Even as discrete, even with Voldemort a little unfocused, he is still the dark lord. Immediately, he detects the magic, even if it has no effect on him.

"What's that?"

Well, at least Sirius has one charm in his repertoire that the man doesn't know.

"Habit," Sirius whispers, putting the wand beside them on a pillow. Perhaps it's unwise to let it so close to Voldemort, while Sirius' own is out of reach, but if he's honest, if Voldemort decided to attack him, Sirius can't really stop him, wand or no wand. "Contraception spell."

It makes Voldemort snort.

Sirius focuses. Because once he's determined to do something, he's going to make damn sure he's doing it well. His pride wouldn't allow for anything else.

And this is in his comfort zone, more than anything else he'd done with Voldemort. Sirius knows sex. Some would say he knows too much. Even if this is new, a man and all, it's still right up his alley.

Sirius knows how to take control in these circumstances, and he knows how to give pleasure. He'll learn what that means for Voldemort.

Most appealing of all, is Sirius' great desire to have the dark lord carefully constructed facade crack.

He keeps his gaze on Voldemort's face, replacing his left hand with his right, tugging at that beautiful cock.

Slowly, he trails the fingers of his left hand lower, ghosting over tightly drawn bollocks, sparsely covered in dark hair. He goes lower, still, and even if he wants to look down, he doesn't, attention firmly on Voldemort's expressions.

There is no reaction when Sirius breaches him with one slick finger, slowly.

It's Sirius that almost moans at the feeling, and he's certain his own face is not as composed as Voldemort's.

That won't do. He needs Voldemort to give him a reaction, to give him *something*.

Sirius feels like he's on fire; he tries to blame it on the fireplace at his back, wood crackling threateningly into the silence. His mind is reeling now but he opts not to process the dozens of thoughts flying through this consciousness, the questions and the doubts, the uncertainty and the logical refusals.

Everything he repressed, all those pesky, hurtful, shameful things- they all tumble out of their carefully locked-up space in his mind, and he feels like he has to scramble after them, catch them back up in his hands and shove them back into his chest. But the sight of Voldemort spread out like that doesn't let him, and Sirius' hands are busy, anyway.

His cock is throbbing, begging for attention, but Sirius ignores it. He adjusts his grip on Voldemort's.

He wishes he'd have more hands, so he could keep doing what he's doing, but also run his fingers over Voldemort's chest, twist them in Voldemort's hair.

He wants to kiss Voldemort again, but he also wants to lick him. Just *lick* him; his neck, those tense lines in his shoulders, twirl his tongue around his bellybutton, bite one of those perfect nipples that are so incredibly tempting.

He wants to do *everything*. At once. Right then. Lust takes over him with an intensity he hadn't so far experienced. It's been so long, he realises, since he wanted *so much*. Sex had become more of a habit, a way to come, just going through the enjoyable motions while his mind raced elsewhere, more often than not barely present in the moment, swimming in alcohol or muggle drugs.

He's not sober now, but everything around him is clear, and he's overwhelmed by being there with Voldemort.

Something so forbidden it was bound to be more exquisite than the things he'd allowed himself so far.

Yet who forbid it, really?

"Take what you want. The only obstacle standing between you and what you most desire is yourself," Voldemort once advised him.

Is this how he'd feel, all the time, if he stopped trying to curb what he deems his darkest desires? If he just gave in, fully, do what he wants, morals be damned, others be damned?

He bends and licks, like he craves, no more thoughts spared on his actions.

He can feel the bones of Voldemort's sternum under his tongue; his skin is so cool, while Sirius feels like he's going to combust into flames soon.

He traces runes with his tongue, ancient, dark things that feel alive, that move and Sirius can taste the magic in them, magic as forbidden as anything else he's doing, and twice as dangerous.

It's intoxicating; his own magic answers to it, awakening in every cell of his body. Padfoot growls inside his head, a primal snarl warning of peril, but Sirius loves perilous things. He basks in them. He was born to them.

He does what he wanted- a bit of everything, exploring Voldemort with his hands and his mouth and his eyes, with his nose.

Nothing is what it seems with this man; who would have thought there's so much to see, to do, with Voldemort's slim torso and chest, yet the mysteries of the world are etched into that narrow expense of skin.

Voldemort's doing some exploring on his own; he's slow to begin, but once he gets to it, he grows bold, fast. Sure fingers press into Sirius' back, or twist in his hair-

His hair, that hangs loose now, black strands everywhere, and Sirius has no memory of it coming undone.

The magic in some of his own tattoos responds to the one in Voldemort's, and it feels like tiny flames reaching out to each other.

Of course, it's his Dark Mark that reacts the most, whenever it's in direct contact with Voldemort's skin. Sirius feels the snake slithering, coils tightening, tail trashing.

And when Voldemort's fingers ghost over it-

It's like he's touching Sirius' mind, directly. He never thought his forearm could elicit such pleasure.

When they kiss, Voldemort grows too daring, trying to dominate it, because that's in his nature, no matter how inexperienced he is, but Sirius won't have it. He growls into Voldemort's mouth, spurred on. Challenged, in a way.

This is for *Sirius*. Voldemort is in charge of Sirius' life, in charge of the war and half the country, he's in charge of everything, gets to decide everything, but this is something Sirius *needs* to dictate.

Voldemort lets him have his way.

For how long? Sirius wonders, but discards the thought because he doesn't want to ponder on it.

He plans on enjoying this submission while it lasts. And he does enjoy it. Just having Voldemort lying there, pliant but delightfully responsive, allowing Sirius to explore his body- it's hotter than any sex he'd had in a while, perhaps ever.

Even grabbing Voldemort's wand to cast the lubrication spell again is more erotic than it has any right to be.

Minutes later, he hesitates; he looks down at Voldemort, who meets his gaze with almost eery calm.

Sirius wants to look into those eyes when he'll fuck him, but- Voldemort won't crack. *He won't, stop trying. It's you that will lose yourself*. And if Voldemort will guard his expressions from Sirius, he has no right to see Sirius fall apart; he already saw too much of that, during the past months.

"Turn around?" he says, and to his dismay, it sounds more like a question than the command he wanted it to be.

When Voldemort shifts, a fresh wave of arousal spreads through Sirius; his cock twitches, as delighted as he is.

And there is Voldemort's back, as mesmerising as the front. Sirius has half a mind to spend more time on it, too, to lick every rune and scar there-

But he can't. His self-control has been tested enough, he needs to be inside Voldemort or he'll just die.

And that arse- fuck. Maddening. Nothing soft, nothing feminine about it; if it would belong to anyone else, Sirius wouldn't look twice, yet now he can't stop staring. Sirius grabs narrow hips and Voldemort lets him pull him up until he's on his hands and knees.

It's the power that makes him so attractive- the power and elegance and purpose present even in the bend of his back.

How is he so *perfect*, no matter that his body is littered with scars, too pale, too thin, skin rough, sparsely covered with dark hair-

This time, Sirius is more careful when he enters him. He'd like to say it's out of consideration for Voldemort's comfort, but he'd be lying.

It's for his benefit. Watching himself disappear slowly, inch by inch, inside Voldemort is an experience in itself, a deeply buried fantasy that he'd had long before he met the man; ever since he hit puberty, Sirius did his best not to imagine this with a man, but he imagined. And now he's doing it.

The lube and the minutes spent preparing him go a long way in making this easier than the last time. And Voldemort feels relaxed, even if Sirius thinks he went very still, the type of still that indicates one isn't even breathing.

When he's fully inside him, Sirius takes a moment; once more, it's for his benefit. He needs a second, needs to close his eyes and try to calm himself.

It feels so *good*.

When he opens his eyes, he's somehow surprised by the sight that greets him; part of him expects all this to be a very vivid fantasy. But Voldemort is still there, and Sirius moves one of his hands, trails it wherever it reaches, wanting to touch all of Voldemort, to leave no part unexplored.

He stops when he reaches his shoulder blade; a survival instinct that Sirius rarely listens to warns him not to grab Voldemort's neck; that it would take it a step too far.

He's walking on a thin line, and Voldemort is playing along, but Sirius isn't sure what will shatter this compromise, yet grabbing him by the back of his neck, such a vulnerable part, might be just the thing.

Sirius knows he'd react viscerally if someone would do that to him, so he abstains, returns his hand to Voldemort's hip.

He moves slowly, shallow, half-thrusts; neither of them makes a single noise. Sirius bites his lip in order to achieve this feat.

The fire crackling behind them is the only sound in the room; somehow, the silence only enhances the experience. There's nothing to distract him from the feel of Voldemort around him.

So bloody tight. Sirius keeps to his rhythm until he feels the muscles clutching his cock give slightly. Even then, Sirius thrusts deeper, but not much faster.

Just a deep, slow fuck, savouring every thrust, the tension in his abdomen, the arousal and pleasure building and building with each second.

He shifts, bends over Voldemort, supporting his weight with one hand on the mattress; the others he lets slide down Voldemort's hip, around him, until his fingers curl around that thick cock.

There's a moan, that in the silence it's almost too loud. But it doesn't come from Voldemort.

Sirius bites his lip so hard, he taste blood. But it's useless. Another moan escapes next, and then a grunt.

He does his best to synchronise every thrust with his fist moving over Voldemort's cock.

He's so focused on it, he doesn't even realise when he's resting his forehead on Voldemort's shoulder, when he puts more of his weight on Voldemort's back.

Don't bite him, for Merlin's sake, don't bite him! It's so tempting, though- all those maks on Voldemort's back, and not even one of them is from Sirius.

How is that fair, when Sirius bears Voldemort's Dark Mark, and many others, smaller scars left by their duels, insignificant, barely visible due to Voldemort's healing skill, but *there*.

He doesn't bite, but he mouths at the skin under his lips. It does taste like magic, he's not imagining it. He didn't even know magic has a taste, but it does, and it's the one that explodes on Sirius' lips and tongue.

He's embarrassed by the sounds that leave him now, low and needy; he muffles them in Voldemort's shoulder.

Finally, finally, Voldemort gives him a reaction, hips twitching, moving on their own accord towards Sirius hand fisting his cock, and then back onto Sirius' cock-

Yes, yes.

Sirius is so close, he can't hold on for much longer, and-

Voldemort not only stops, but he reaches down, and his long fingers press into Sirius' left wrist with such force that Sirius lets go of his cock.

But he can't even be confused, because Voldemort's fingers are pressing into his Dark Mark, and that's it, any small trace of self-control dissolves and Sirius fucks into him properly, hard and fast, erratic and without rhythm.

His orgasm feels aggressive in its intensity; no other word to describe it. When it passes, Sirius is left with a pounding headache.

His knees feel wobbly. He's spent, in all the senses of the word.

"You're not an incubus, are you?" he asks, only half joking, when he crashes on the bed with no elegance whatsoever. He wouldn't put it past Voldemort to suck magic out of people, after all.

Voldemort lies down with more grace than Sirius, turns around-

His neck is flushed, red spreading down his chest. *Fuck.* Sirius' cock twitches, just the idea that he is the one to have made the dark lord *flush* sparking new embers of arousal low in his abdomen.

No, stop, I'll die, he warns his misbehaving cock.

Voldemort doesn't deign to answer the question. He is still hard, of course. Very hard. Looks painful, really.

Sirius is happy to lend a helping hand. He reaches out, but Voldemort moves swiftly, standing in the blink of an eye. His robe appears around him, and his wand flies from the mattress to his pocket. He doesn't look upset; a bit tense, perhaps, but there's nothing to indicate something is amiss in his eyes. In fact, he appears quite pleased with Sirius, judging by the satisfied glint flashing through the red and brown.

How can he be satisfied?

“You don’t want to come.” Sirius meant to ask, but it comes of as a statement.

“No.”

Sirius is *intrigued.*

(-)

He’s in bed with a witch. The third, in as many nights.

This one is a tourist from Spain. Sirius finds her accent adorable, a nice detail to differentiate her from the others.

He hates fucking in the rooms above the Leaky Cauldron- the beds there creak something awful, and he has to suffer Tom’s judging eyes when he eventually goes down to the pub.

“Mr Black,” he says. “You can’t carry on like this.” Sirius doesn’t know if he means the drinking, or the women.

But he won’t take any woman back to his house and sad mattress, and this is where she rents for the duration of her visit, so The Leaky Cauldron it is.

When he makes her come, a wave of frustration settles over him- this is how it’s supposed to go. Why didn’t Voldemort want to come?

When Sirius comes himself, Voldemort is still on his mind.

He has a feeling he’s there to stay, and that nothing will dislodge Voldemort from living inside Sirius’ head.

(-)

Sirius thinks he’s being set up. There’s no other explanation for it. He’s been invited to play cards with the Lestranges brothers, his own brother, and Avery.

And it’s going great, he’s cleaning them out, winning game after game, drinking and bullying Avery.

Rodolphus is apparently still banned from his own Manor, because they’ve convened in a London townhouse the Lestranges barely use, but now shows signs of inhabitance.

And then, towards the end of the night- though it's morning by that time, really- Rodolphus talks to Yaxley about murdering Edgar Bones the following week.

Rabastan pays them no mind, frustrated with his cards. Avery is barely awake.

Regulus' eyes meet Sirius', a bit wide.

Sirius does not believe for a second this is carelessness on Rodolphus' part. He is drunk, but even drunk- Rodolphus is not one to babble things, especially a murder plot.

He must be setting me up. He still doesn't trust me.

Or was Voldemort that put him up to it?

Sirius doesn't want to believe it. It's stupid, Voldemort has no reason to trust him either, but Sirius does not want to believe he's using Rodolphus to test Sirius' loyalties.

Sirius doesn't know what to do; when he returns to his house, he just sits on the floor, staring at the walls.

He has to tell Dumbledore. *Yet- surely, that's what Rodolphus intends, no? Or what Voldemort intends.*

And if he tattles, they'll know it was him.

But if he keeps silent- are they actually planning to kill Edgar?

Yes.

Edgar is a prominent Order Member; he holds one of the elected seats in the Wizengamont. He's very vocal in his support for Dumbledore and for muggleborns. Even worse, one of his brothers just married a half-blood.

And what if Voldemort *didn't* put Rodolphus up to this? What if the man was truly drunk, so distracted over his fight with Bellatrix that he was careless for a second? What then? What will Voldemort do to Rodolphus is Sirius fucks over their plans-

Twice he Apparates to Hogsmeade only to Apparate back after he takes a few steps on the path that would lead him to Hogwarts.

He has to consider Regulus, too. Regulus, who is confident Sirius is on 'their' side. He'll know it was Sirius that betrayed them if Death Eaters go to kill Edgar only to be met by battalion of Aurors.

Somehow, the prospect of his brother's disappointment is worse to imagine than Voldemort's fury at being betrayed.

What if they arrest Rabastan? Or who exactly will be sent to kill Edgar? What if any of those Death Eaters know about Regulus' Dark Mark?

In the end, Sirius says nothing, to no-one.

(-)

Edgar Bones, his wife, and his two children, both having had attended Hogwarts alongside Sirius, are found dead in their home, just two days later. Aurors find a survivor of the massacre- Edgar's youngest sister, Amelia, a cleric at the Ministry, bound and petrified on the floor.

Edgar's parents receive a letter, written in blood, warning them to stop their mudblood loving ways, and their support of Dumbledore, or the rest of the family will be targeted, as well.

Sirius doesn't go to the funeral, but he goes to the wake- not for Edgar, who never liked Sirius, but to support James.

James actually dated Edgar's daughter for a while, in their sixth year, before Lily finally decided to give him a chance.

An opulent flower arrangement arrives at some point, delivered by one of those fancy florists on Diagon Alley.

Our deepest condolences, it writes on the massive black ribbon tied to it, and it is followed by signatures of several Houses that hold the inherited seats of the Wizengamot. Sirius sees Rodolphus' signature on it.

Amelia sets it ablaze with her wand.

Sirius drinks- for once, James joins him, matching Sirius glass for glass, until he can't stand anymore and Lily takes him home.

(-)

"What's in it for you?" Sirius asks, as he pulls on his trousers. He's tired, drunk, feels so guilty about Edgar. The wake was still going on, full of crying people, when Sirius finally left.

Voldemort buttons up the high collar of his robe, by the fireplace. He looks content; victorious. Why wouldn't he be? He got rid of another powerful man loyal to Dumbledore.

They did not speak about it. Sirius Apparated to his door, and they went straight to the bedroom, no words exchanged.

“If you don’t get any pleasure out of it, why do it?” Sirius goes on, because, once more, Voldemort didn’t come, and he discouraged Sirius from trying to bring him off.

“I like the closeness of it,” Voldemort says, matter-of-factly.

And it’s -Sirius’s heart gives a little throb. He was angry at Voldemort when he showed up- or he thinks that was anger, he’s not really sure-but now it drains out of him.

He looks at this man that is responsible for the war their country is succumbing into, more and more, so feared across the board, so beyond life and death and yet-

I like the closeness of it.

Sirius realises, like never before, that he’s the only one to be close to Voldemort. In all his long life, Voldemort had been entirely apart from others.

(-)

“I am with child,” Narcissa says, smiling, for once looking more like the kid Sirius remembers and less like the ice queen Malfoy she became.

Sirius hugs her.

“*Look surprised,*” Lucius mouths silently behind Narcissa.

Sirius lifts her off and twirls her around and she squeaks and bats away at his arms, trying to suppress her giggles. “Put me down, you uncivilised brute!”

He does, and he plants a wet kiss on her cheek.

“I’m happy for you!” he tells her, honestly.

Her eyes are soft and kind; it truly makes him happy to see her this unguarded and excited over something.

“You knew, didn’t you?” she asks, turning to narrow her eyes at Lucius. “We agreed we’d wait to confirm it, darling.”

“Not really, no. You said we should wait and assumed I was on board.”

“Now, now. Don’t fight.” Sirius sinks into a very comfortable and no doubt ridiculously expensive settee.

“We don’t fight,” Lucius says, upper lip curled. “We’re not commoners.”

“You’re so obnoxious.” Sirius rolls his eyes at the pair of blonds.

When the food is ready, they have a nice dinner, as dinner always is at Malfoy Manor. A little formal, there's at least six feet between all of them around the huge dining table, and there is far too much cutlery. Sirius insists to only use one fork, though all the lessons in table etiquette are ingrained in his head, he could recite them even asleep, but he refuses to put those lessons to use.

"We'd like to ask you to be our child's Guardian," Lucius says over tea.

Sirius looks up, surprised and oddly touched. That's one of the highest honours in their world.

A cynical part of him knows it's only because of his blood, that will need to be mixed with the child's, in a ritual, and no one has blood as pure as Sirius, but still- they could have asked Regulus, instead.

"You do remember that means I'll raise the kid in case you kick it, right?" Sirius asks. "You want a little Malfoy in my hands? I can't keep a plant alive."

Lucius rolls his eyes. "I won't *'kick it'*, do not worry."

Well, if there was one person certain to get out of this war unscathed, that would be Lucius.

"Who will be the other Guardian?" he asks, though he knows. Of course he knows.

"Bella, obviously," Narcissa says, insulted Sirius even had to ask.

He sighs. But he says yes, because one doesn't refuse such an offer.

(-)

Two weeks later, he's asked to be a Godfather. From what he understands, it's a similar role to a Guardian, but no magical rituals are involved.

It's a lot different from when the Malfoy asked. There's a lot of crying, for once. Lily is crying, James is weeping. Even Sirius gets teary-eyed.

There's a lot of unchecked joy and planning and Sirius truly is happy for them.

He is.

In a little corner of his head, he feels left behind. James is becoming something else-first a husband, now a father and it's what he wants and Sirius only cares that he's happy but- but Sirius's place in that family is not really a place at all.

Chapter End Notes

I struggled a lot with this chapter. I haven't had the best time in real life, and coupled with a writer's block made it hard to work on this. It's still not how I wanted it to look, but I wanted to just sit down and do it, because it's been almost two months since my last update.

Thank you for your patience. As always, I would love to hear your thoughts! ❤️

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I can't control it," Sirius says, staring up at the sky.

It's snowing all around them, fat, pristine flakes gently falling to the ground. Sirius reaches out to catch one outside of the charm Voldemort cast around the blanket they're on. He would do without the charm, would like to see the snowflakes land on Voldemort's long lashes.

But Voldemort is old, and he apparently doesn't see the fun in exposing himself to the elements, so they're protected by an invisible, warm bubble.

"Because you're afraid of it," Voldemort answers.

Sirius bristles, but he can't deny it. "You don't know what it's like."

Voldemort says nothing for a while, a solid presence at Sirius' side. He's sitting, long legs drawn to his chest, his arms linked around them. Sirius gets more comfortable, lying down.

The snow is truly beautiful to look at. Calming, too. Or at least it would be, if Sirius didn't feel dread looming over him.

He can't recall how exactly he agreed to try this, or why it sounded like a good idea at the time.

It's because you want to impress him, an unhelpful part of his brain supplies.

"Show me, then," Voldemort says, and the snowflakes are obscured when he shifts to bend over Sirius.

The starlight always made everything more beautiful. Voldemort is no exception.

The stars in the background make Voldemort's skin look healthier. Still pale, but marble-like. It makes his dark hair appear black.

His eyes are as intense as always; not even the stars can change them.

Sirius feels the tentative press of Legillimency at the forefront of his consciousness.

It's very different from the time when Voldemort simply barged in, forcefully and painfully.

He's asking permission now, a bright, warm presence instead of cold steel slashing at his mind.

There's something very intimate about sharing mind-space with someone, willingly.

It's not something one gets to experience often. Sirius did, with Bella. They had nothing to hide from each other, and she'd help him practice both Occlumency and Legilimency. Sometimes, he'd get lost inside her head, until he wasn't sure who was who anymore.

He did it with his father, too. But his father was a much stricter instructor than Bella, and he certainly didn't allow Sirius inside his head.

And Sirius did his best to hide many feelings from him, inadequate things, unworthy of a Black.

He lets Voldemort in, guides him to the memory of being snatched from Earth and hurled through the skies with no control. Of being trapped, ripped in two, one Sirius stuck on the ground, the other in the air, both just as helpless.

He gets terrified all over again, just focusing on the memory. He ends the connection, and shifts uncomfortably on the blanket, trying to control his breathing.

Voldemort, still bent above him, looks *hungry.* There's no other way to describe the expression on his face, the desire in his eyes, shining as brightly as the stars behind him.

"Whatever," Sirius snaps, pushing him away, sitting up. Of course Voldemort wouldn't grasp why Sirius was terrified, even as they lived that memory together. Voldemort simply doesn't fear. "You're a freak," he says, annoyed.

"You have to trust it," Voldemort says, and even his voice sounds hungry. "To respect it. That is how magic is meant to be approached."

"No," Sirius informs him. "We are supposed to control magic, not let magic control us-"

"We *are* magic."

Sirius has no good rebuttal for that.

"Once you trust, once you respect, then you can conquer."

"Look at you, Mr Trusting," Sirius mocks.

"I trust magic, not people."

"Some magic is not meant to be called upon, alright? It's healthy to have a bit of fear," Sirius says, though he isn't convincing. He's not even convincing himself. Blacks aren't supposed to fear anything. Those are Dumbledore's words coming out of his mouth. But they sound wise, so he delivers them with as much confidence as he's able. "Some might call that fear respect, actually."

"Don't quote Dumbledore at me," Voldemort says.

Sirius blinks. To recognise the Headmaster so easily-

They must have talked. They must have had discussions like this, just as I did.

Voldemort was probably called in Dumbledore's office often, just as Sirius was, to be warned of dark magic, of consequences.

Clearly, Dumbledore's efforts were wasted on Voldemort.

They were wasted on you, too, that traitorous voice whispers.

"Fine," Sirius hisses. "I'm afraid of it." The words are so hard to get past his lips. To admit fear was never easy. "Happy? You're this brave, unfazed entity and I am a lowly coward. You should have been a Gryffindor," Sirius spits, trying his best to at least insult Voldemort, since he's admitting defeat.

"I told you I can help you conquer your fears, don't you remember?"

Sirius remembers. He remembers all too well. The first time Voldemort touched him, circled around him, hand on Sirius' chest.

"Will you let me set you free?"

He shudders.

"I wasn't always fearless," Voldemort says, and damn him, Sirius is instantly drawn in by this admission. "But I decided I will put my faith in magic from the moment I learned I was a wizard. And so far, I was never let down. Even when I did fear."

His mind presses against Sirius' again, only when Sirius drops his shields, Voldemort doesn't invade his mind, but pulls Sirius inside his.

The ring is on the ground. An ugly thing, but it is his. It was always meant to be his. His only connection to family. To legacy.

His heart slams against his chest. Something small, weak, scared whispers, begs him not to do it.

But he sees his father's face so clearly, the disgust, the rejection-

He breathes in, ignores that voice and lifts his wand, choosing to focus on how his father's face looked frozen in death. It's preferable to the images from before.

He focuses on the feeling of taking his life, the rush of power, of justice.

He performs the ritual.

Pain explodes everywhere inside him, spreading like fire, all consuming, devouring him. There's nothing he can do to stop it.

Sirius gasps on the blanket. He can still feel the phantom pain, burning and unrelenting, unforgiving.

He's convinced he's bleeding, he must be, the pain had been- he shakes his head. *Just a memory. Not even mine.*

Sirius stares at Voldemort. His face is as frozen as their surroundings, no sign that reliving that memory affected him.

How did you survive that, Sirius wonders? He read that most people that try to make a Horcrux do not survive the process, even if they manage to perform the incredibly difficult ritual perfectly. The magic used to separate a piece of one's soul from the whole is unpredictable, uncontrollable, dark and almost cognisant. A force of its own, that should never be invited to take control.

Sirius swallows, stares into Voldemort's brown-red eyes. *He looks like his father,* Sirius thinks, because he saw Voldemort's father's face in his memory.

He still looks like him. Tom Riddle, the one from the picture Sirius stole from the Ministry was identical to his father, but even the version in front of him still carries that resemblance.

Sirius felt the *rejection*, too, as Voldemort remembered it.

In fact, it's what most bothered him about the memory- pain...well, physical pain is temporary, but rejection is another matter. Sirius knows rejection. It was in his mother's eyes, when he'd been a teenager, and it hurt- it *hurts*, still- but at least he has memories of his mother loving him, too.

Is that more painful or less than only having rejection? Is it worse to lose something you used to have, or worse if you never had it at all?

"Fear is natural, despite what your parents told you. You must accept it, own it, and then you will surpass it."

"Asking me to subject myself to that," he gestures vaguely at the sky, "is akin to asking you to subject yourself to making a Horcrux again," Sirius counters. "I doubt you'd be willing to go through it again, no matter how brave you were the first time."

A smile. The fucker *smiles*. "Come now," he drawls, amused. At what, Sirius doesn't know. He doesn't get the joke. "You can't compare it. There was no pain for you."

"I'd rather it hurt," Sirius says. He'd take the pain over the lack of control he experienced. "I can't stop it- I-"

"I'm here," Voldemort says. "I can pull you out of it."

You wouldn't know how to, Sirius thinks to say. *This is magic you can't control, neither of us can.* It isn't wise.

But that is what Dumbledore would say, not Sirius.

Fear and excitement mix in his chest, and Sirius already knows he'll give in. He could blame it all on Voldemort, on his persuasion skills, but he'd be lying.

The stars always called to him, despite the warning he received from his family, despite his father telling him to ignore all of it.

He lies better on the blanket, looking up. The yearning is always there, *always*. He did learn to ignore it, to keep it in; he often tried to *physically* get closer to the stars on his broom, or his bike, but he controlled the magic inside him, shoved it down, down, down, until the moment he was desperate to heal his father.

Until he lost it at his father's grave.

There was blood involved, both times. When he was sixteen, runes made in blood, an entire constellation replicated around his father's bed.

At the grave, he'd been injured.

But he feels the call, without blood spilling. He always did. So he just lets it take over.

He closes his eyes, he knows he does, but it's as if he *didn't*. The sky stretches endlessly above him.

And then the view shifts, and he's looking down at himself, at Voldemort leaning over him.

It's almost peaceful for a second. He's focused on Voldemort's face, trying to gleam something from it, but then he's pulled upwards, as fast as before, that flying sensation that somehow registers more like falling in reverse.

The cabin becomes small, then gone, everything gets smaller. He can't control it, he can't control the fear, either. He tries, though everything is happening so fast, disorientating and terrifying. He tries to breathe, but, of course, he can't.

It all becomes much worse when everything goes black, then bright, and the silence stretches on around him, no wind, no more moving, no more flying, just-*nothing*.

Nothing and everything.

He breathes, and for a moment he has his body again, he can feel the ground beneath him, he can feel something wet on his face, but it's just a fracture of a sensation, before he's back to nothing-

He hears his name. He hears it in his ear.

He hears it all around him, in the vastness of the universe, an echo of 'Sirius' coming from all sides.

He jerks, and once more he's on the blanket, for only a second, before he's back amongst the stars.

His terror only mounts, oppressive and all-consuming.

"Sirius."

He's yanked into his body. No falling, no burning sensation like he experienced that night at his father grave; he's just back on the blanket, breathing harshly, eyes open, Voldemort's face above his.

A flash of pale bone, as Voldemort puts his wand back into the folds of his robe.

The terror from before mixes with relief that he's escaped, again. That he's *himself*.

The fear that he'll be pulled back tries to wedge itself in his heart, like it did before, but it doesn't quite take hold.

Not with Voldemort there.

"I broke your charm," Sirius says, trying to sound calm. He doesn't, voice breathy and panicked.

Snowflakes fall on them, rapidly. In the storm of emotions raging inside him, Sirius can only focus on the perfect flakes falling on Voldemort's hair and disappearing as soon as they land, melting away.

Voldemort smiles. He probably tries to look calm, too, but his smile comes on the *feral* side, and the hunger in his gaze is almost tangible.

"It appears you did," he says, looking away from Sirius to inspect their surroundings, just as Sirius was about to get lost in that hunger, just as he was about to grab Voldemort's hair and pull him into a kiss. "It was only a measly weather protection charm, with no hope of withstanding the magic coming out of you."

Stupidly, Sirius thought it was *him* that flew to the skies, out to the stars.

But, of course, he remains on the ground, and it's his magic that makes the journey for him.

The air is thick with dark magic, it clings to Sirius' skin. Not his *own* dark magic- oh no, that's like a caress, a part of him, a gift in his bloodline that he just used.

It's something else, firmer, colder. It's whatever spell Voldemort used to end the projection.

A warding charm, probably, Sirius thinks. An old, ancient one, used to trap something inside it.

"Take it off," Sirius says. "I want to try again."

Without fear.

He feels exhausted. He knows he's drained, his hands numb, prickling, his stomach in knots. He knows that if he were standing, he'd sway on his feet.

His grandfather used to show him some 'tricks' as he called them. Small enough things that any Black can do. They'd leave Sirius shaking, and his grandfather would say 'enough' and would refuse to show Sirius anything else for months.

“No,” Voldemort says. “You’re too weak right now.”

“I’m not weak,” Sirius splutters, indignant.

Voldemort sighs with fond exasperation. “Drained, then.”

“Do you get drained when you make a twisted, powerful ritual?” Sirius demands.

“I’m in my prime,” Voldemort tells him, patiently. “Your magic is still growing. Don’t push yourself.”

“I’m sure you pushed when you were my age-”

“I am immortal,” Voldemort points out, and there’s no denying that. “And I might have unwisely performed magic that covers long distances, that I shouldn’t have. But there’s long distance, and then there is *that.*” He points his chin to the sky.

Sirius is so tired, he can’t even argue. “No meteorite showers this time, or whatever the muggles saw last I did it,” Sirius says, watching the skies. And it’s easy to look up. He’s not afraid now. He knows he won’t get trapped. He knows Voldemort can stop it, that he was the one to force Sirius’ magic back into himself.

“Not that we can see,” Voldemort answers. “Who knows what their telescopes detect.” He shrugs, unconcerned.

“What warding charm did you use?”

“A complicated one. I’ll give you the books when we get back inside.”

When they do go back into the cabin, Voldemort presents him with a ridiculous stack of books. He piles one over the other, the stack almost as tall as the desk.

“I’ll pass,” Sirius says, already bored just by looking at all that paper.

Voldemort laughs.

(-)

When he goes to one of his semi regular dinners with his mother and brother, he finds Burke there, with his daughter.

Sirius barely remembers the man from some family functions in his childhood. They’re related- his great aunt Belvina married a Burke, and it shows in the man’s grey eyes and silky black hair. But the Burkes were scorned, because they were middle class- *the horror*, Aunt Lucretia used to say- and one of them owns a shop in Diagon Alley.

Voldemort worked for someone in my family, it occurs to Sirius right then. Though he rarely thinks of anyone as his family, if they don't also share, or at least shared his name at some point.

"How do you do?" the man asks, extending his hand.

Sirius shakes it, then turns to the daughter, who also has his eyes. His age, or just about, but Burkes never send their children to school, what with all the 'mudbloods and blood traitors' going there. He thinks he vaguely remembers her from his childhood, too, but he isn't sure.

A tall, thin thing, she is. Sirius kisses her hand and she smiles at him.

Sirius is certain this is another attempt to marry Regulus off, so he is relaxed during the meal, and pleasant, because it's funny to see Regulus trying to avoid any topics that would even hint at a willingness to marry.

It's only as desert is served when he and his brother realise that the girl is not meant for *Regulus*.

"Why don't you show Mildritha our planetarium, Sirius?" his mother asks.

He is so shocked, he accepts.

They walk in silence, Sirius not really paying attention, knowing his way to the planetarium even if he'd have his eyes close.

He should be angry his mother is setting him up, but he's not.

He's almost….touched by it. Because she cares enough to attempt to secure a match for him; why, she even picked someone she might imagine Sirius would like; someone that looks, at least *vaguely*, like Bellatrix.

"Here it is," Sirius says, when they arrive. "Floor, walls, stars."

He always hated showing people around; he finds it stupid. Everyone has eyes to see, and he's not about to explain every detail, like 'that's the chair my father used to sit in, holding me in his lap and teaching me the constellations' or 'see that small crack in the glass? That's where I tried to throw Regulus through the window'.

He does check to see if the small burn is still in the corner of the room, ruining the carpet- *'we've had this carpet since the Middle Ages! Do you know how expensive it is?* his mother shrieked when she saw the damage- under a table that holds some instruments.

Andromeda, Narcissa and the *other one* tried to do a ritual on Beltane, when they were all so young they weren't allowed to attend the main festivities. The girls were supposed to keep an eye on Sirius and baby Regulus. Instead, they tried to summon a Love Spirit so they could find out who they are destined to marry.

They summoned *something*, alright, and the candles fell to the floor, one of the curtains caught fire. It was only Kreacher's quick intervention that saved them from burning alive.

“How is Bella?” Mildritha asks. “I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Alive,” Sirius hisses.

She blinks, surprised by the hostility, but recovers gracefully.

“And Narcissa?”

“Pregnant.”

Silence falls, and Sirius instantly feels guilty for being so short.

It’s just that he’s uncomfortable with the stars staring down at him through the glass ceiling, in that room where he used to spend hours on end.

He puts on a charming smile and engages her in a conversation about family, trying to determine what kind of cousins they are, how many times removed. Once they settle that, he brings her back to the dining room.

They suffer through tea, and then the Burkes depart. As soon as they hear Kreacher closing the door behind them, his mother gets a combative air around her, eyes narrowing, ready for a fight.

Sirius can practically see the arguments brewing in her head, the speech about legacy and heirs and war-

He can’t help himself; if he had any inkling about what he was about to do, he wouldn’t have done it. As it is, he doesn’t have the time to think it through, overcome by a strange fondness, by the fact that she *cares* enough to marry him off, not just Regulus.

He leans in and kisses her cheek.

Her face transforms with shock, and she stares up at him with wide eyes.

He takes advantage of her most likely frozen brain cells.

“Thank you,” he says, taking his jacket. “But I’m not marrying her.”

And then he quickly scampers off, before either of them can ruin the nice moment.

(-)

He’s still happy about it, in a smiling mood, when he goes to check on Narcissa the following day. He’s taking his guardian role seriously, and his goddfather one, as well, visiting with Cissa and Lily as many times as he can.

Lily is used to having him over often, yet before he only paid attention to James, or mostly to James, and Lily left them alone to their shenanigans, so now she's a bit confused on why he insists to spend time with her, even if James isn't home. Sirius doesn't know how this godfather thing works, but a guardian needs to be close to his charge, from as early as possible, even when it is still in its mother's womb. It is said the child will still grow some awareness and recognition of the magic of those around the mother.

"You are unnaturally cheery," Narcissa comments, just as Lucius comes home from wherever he's been, joining them in the conservatory.

"Mum tried to find me a wife," he says, playing with the petals of some strange flowers that purrs when he touches it.

"Oh, really? Who did she suggest?" Narcissa puts the shears down, gently peeling off her gardening gloves when Lucius bends to kiss her temple.

"Burke."

Lucius scrunches up his nose. "You can do much better than Burke," he says.

"She's perfectly alright," Sirius argues, insulted on behalf of his mother that Lucius would find fault in her choices.

"She's alright, yes. But no match for a Black."

"Aunt probably thought Mildirtha would appeal to Sirius, what with her looks," Narcissa intervenes, lightly. And then, a bit sharply. "Oh, stop that, I'm not going to break apart!"

Lucius raises his arms in surrender, having just tried to help Narcissa stand, which apparently was a mistake.

"I'm not even showing, for Merlin's sake, you'll be unbearable for the next seven months, won't you?"

"Already having mood swings, I see," Sirius teases her, but then quickly apologises when one of her beloved flowers attempts to strangle him.

Over a light brunch, they discuss names. *Again.* Lucius truly is unbearable.

When it is just Sirius and Narcissa alone, they can talk about flowers, or gossip about salacious things going around with their acquaintances, but when Lucius is present, he can only talk about the baby.

Narcissa looks at her husband with a mixture of love and exasperation.

"Never," she shoots down *any* name Lucius suggests, instantly, without a second worth of thought. "I was always upset with mother for not giving me a proper Black name," she says. "I decided early on that if I have a son, I'll name him Draco, and if I have a daughter, I'll name her Lycoris, so at least they can have Black names. So Draco it is, Lucius. I don't know why you keep bringing other names up."

“Because our son won’t be a Black,” Lucius says. “So he certainly doesn’t need a proper Black-” he trails off when both Narcissa and Sirius glare at him.

“I already told Father it will be Draco, so it’s a done deal.” She smiles, proud of herself, chin raised. “It’s his first grandson.”

Cygnus always wanted a son- he never got that, but at least he gets a grandson.

“You hate your father,” Lucius points out. “*I* hate your father.”

“And we both dislike yours,” Narcissa says, eyes narrowed. “They are still our fathers, however, and mine is happy with the name.”

“Well, mine isn’t.”

“That’s so sad,” Narcissa drawls. “When you will carry a baby, you can name it and please your father.”

Lucius gives up; he always does, with Narcissa, but especially now that she’s pregnant and he doesn’t want to upset her.

Narcissa uses her pregnancy to guilt Sirius into talking to Bellatrix.

“I feel sick and dizzy, and all around miserable- it would bring me joy to see you and Bella reconciled,” she whines the following day, when it’s just her and Sirius in the garden.

“You look gorgeous for someone that’s miserable,” Sirius says, and he holds strong, even if she does her best to look pitiful.

It’s always hard to resist those doe eyes, the air of fragility that surrounds her on the best of days, let alone now that she’s carrying a baby.

Luckily, Sirius knows it’s all fake; Narcissa is as strong as any Black. She just uses honey and soft words, unlike most of the other members of their family.

“Sirius,” she starts, but he cuts her off.

“She killed my-” he isn’t even sure how to describe Marlene. “How do you expect me to talk to her, ever again?”

“She’s your blood. We all know she is a little…*touched*, but she’s ours.”

“No doubt you’d say the same thing if she killed Lucius, huh?”

Narcissa’s lip raises in a delicate sneer- if there ever was such a thing as a delicate sneer.

“Do not compare my *marriage* to whatever you had with that woman. Lucius and I said our vows in front of gods and men; magic bounds us, and now our blood will give life to a child.”

“Whatever.” There’s no fighting with her. She’ll find a rebuttal for anything he might say.

Narcissa is an expert in defending Bellatrix and her often undefendable actions; she's been doing it for many, many years.

(-)

"Something to report?" Dumbledore asks.

Fucked Lord Voldemort, who was a virgin.

"No," Sirius says after a long hesitation. Dumbledore catches it and looks at Sirius expectedly. "It's just that I think he suspects I'm not on his side."

Dumbledore nods after a second. "With open double spies, one can never be too sure," he says ominously.

It pisses Sirius off that they still distrust him, after everything.

The fact that now he's actually doing untrustworthy things doesn't matter too much.

(-)

"Oh, thank God!" Lily is white as chalk, and she throws herself in Sirius' arms as soon as he enters the hospital room.

Remus is there too, his eyes more suspicious than ever.

Sirius pushes Lily away, ignores Remus and hurries to James's bedside.

"You alright, Jamie?"

He looks alright. Sirius checks him over, like a mother hen, pulling the sheets apart-

"Don't call me Jamie," James protests, batting at Sirius' hands. "I'm fine. I really am. Just a nasty cut. I got really, really, *really* lucky."

"What happened?"

Since Lily Floo-called to tell him James is at St Mungo's after an Order mission gone wrong, Sirius's heart still stomps inside his chest.

"We were with the O," James says, even if they're alone in the room. "And we got ambushed."

Sirius knows a trial is approaching for Jugson, who was arrested the past month. The Order is attempting to protect one of the witnesses ready to testify she'd seen Jugson attacking a muggleborn. Apparently, Rodolphus convinced or strong-armed the Ministry into not giving the woman Auror protection.

Sirius hadn't paid much attention since he gathered from Lucius that Jugson is a low-level Death Eater who has no idea about Regulus, so Sirius wasn't really interested in the mess. He did inform Dumbledore that, more likely than not, Death Eaters would attempt to get to the witness.

Yet no one bothered to tell him when or who the witness was. Not Dumbledore, not Voldemort. *The fucking arseholes.*

He certainly didn't imagine *James* would be part of the guards.

"You were outnumbered?" Surely Dumbledore must have at least been smart enough to send plenty of Order members, knowing the Death Eaters were coming.

If James says he was the only one sent, Sirius will poison Dumbledore's tea the next time he sees the- in fact, he might poison Dumbledore anyway, because he used Sirius' information to endanger James' life.

"Not really, no. But, big V came himself, with a small escort."

Sirius' blood drains from his face. He checks James over again.

"I'm fine, I got lucky-"

"*Lucky*?" Remus asks, and there's something in his tone that makes Sirius turn. He's looking at Sirius.

"Remus,"James warns.

"How many times has anyone heard of Voldemort's aim being so bad as to just scratch someone? Huh? I mean, his aim was good enough to obliterate Wade and Shaw, with a single curse just seconds before you placed yourself in his way."

"You did *what*? You freaking moron!" Sirius snarls at James.

"What did you expect me to do? Let him have her?"

Well, yeah. Sirius doesn't say it because it's *wrong*. But going head-to-head with Voldemort over some insignificant woman James doesn't even know...

"You are lucky," Sirius says, calming himself. James is there, in one piece, with only a red mark on the side of his abdomen. *He's fine.* It's all that matters.

Remus is staring daggers at Sirius.

“Yes,” James says with forced cheerfulness. “I duck really well. What can I say? Best Chaser in the world and all that. If I avoided Warrington’s bludgers, Voldemort’s curse would be nothing in comparison.”

“Stop it! It’s obvious what’s going on. Why do you deny it?” Remus stands.

Sirius is getting mad, even though Remus is right.

“All the others on the mission *died*! Except you! Everyone in the world knows Sirius cares about you. And I’m sure his *master* knows it, too.”

“Stop,” James says, all cheer gone. “Remus-”

“Don’t deny it anymore, James. It’s right in your face. Didn’t you see how guilty he looked at Edgar’s wake? I know that guilt-”

Sirius sees red; his fingers twitch for his wand.

“Get out!” James is enraged. He stands, wincing, putting himself between Sirius and Remus. “Get out!”

“Stop lying to yourself, James-we know what he is! We knew since he was young that something-”

“I don’t want to see you again,” James yells back.

“Boys,” Lily comes to stand with James. “Come on- Remus, you don’t get it, ok? James, sit down.”

“Oh, I get it.”

“You don’t get shit! I’m so fucking tired of your doubts,” James accuses.

In a massive effort to not do anything stupid, Sirius turns to leave. Peter is in the doorway, watching. His eyes meet Sirius’.

He looks *grateful*, unlike Remus; would Remus have preferred James be killed by Voldemort? Would that have been less *suspicious*?

Sirius pushes past Peter and leaves, James’s voice getting higher and higher behind him.

(-)

He enters Voldemort’s cabin without knocking, his magic surging around him, angry and uncontrolled, blood boiling in his veins.

Voldemort looks a tad concerned for a second. “He can’t be dead,” he says, and he sounds almost defensive. “I made sure no great harm would-”

“He’s fine!” Sirius snarls.

Voldemort frowns. “Then why are you like...” He gestures towards Sirius, who’s pacing, agitated. “Like this.”

Because Remus doesn’t trust him. *Remus is right not to. You did get Edgar killed with your silence.*

Sirius isn’t sure what bothers him most about all this.

“Remus knows. He told James I’m a Death Eater, because why would you not blow James apart if it weren’t for me? He knows about Edgar. He called you my ‘master’." Sirius spits out, and the chandelier falls, smashing to pieces all around him. The furniture vibrates under Sirius’s magic.

Voldemort doesn’t say anything for a while. Which is wise. Anything would piss Sirius off even more.

That fact that Sirius came to *him* pisses Sirius off. *What am I doing here? What the fuck am I doing?*

Minutes later, Sirius’s magic retreats, leaving him exhausted as if he ran a marathon but still very much angry.

“What does he know about Bones?” Voldemort asks, creeping closer. “You had nothing to do with that.”

“I knew,” Sirius snarls. “I knew in time to alert Dumbledore. And I didn’t. I felt guilty; Remus smelled it right off me.”

“How did you find out about Bones?” Voldemort asks, watching Sirius intently, a small frown on his face.

So that really was just Rodolphus trying to test me.

Sirius shrugs. “I’m a spy. That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“I think reporting back is what spies do, not just stumble over information and keep it for themselves.”

“Fuck off!” Sirius spits, magic surging again.

Voldemort takes hold of his arm; Sirius flinches but doesn’t wretch it back. Long pale fingers start removing pieces of chandelier that impaled themselves into Sirius’ skin.

He could use his wand for it, but it seems they’re doing it the muggle way.

Sirius just looks on, magic still buzzing around him.

Eventually, Voldemort does pull out his wand, waves it over the cuts that close under its tip, and then he reaches over and removes a shard of glass from Sirius' hair-

Sirius pushes him into the bookshelf, already kissing him before Voldemort's back even hits the wooden shelves.

It's the first time this has happened while he's sober. But he's so angry, so confused, it doesn't matter.

Sirius needs to just forget everything. Remus's face, his words. How true they were. James's naive defence of him.

He kisses harder, grabs Voldemort's hair and pulls, crowding him into the shelves; Sirius would just like to step inside him, completely, hide away from the fucking world.

He bites the lip under his teeth hard and feels blood on his tongue. It tastes perfect.

See, mum, you were wrong. Half-blood does not taste like dirt. Doesn't taste any different than Sirius' own blood.

The thought makes him sad.

He wishes people hadn't been utter dicks to Voldemort when he was young. He wishes Tom Riddle would have been welcomed with open arms in their world, no matter his blood status. Maybe the war would have been avoided.

The slightly coopery taste also makes Sirius realise Voldemort is the first half-blood Sirius sees on a regular basis, in an intimate way.

Sirius fucks everyone, regardless of blood status, yet the only two women he actually took on dates more than once had been purebloods.

A coincidence, surely. It just happened that Rita and Marlene were the only ones he actually liked more than a bit of fun. Nothing to do with blood. He even sleeps with Muggles, for Merlin's sake.

I can't be a blood purist, Sirius thinks, almost desperate. *I can't be like them.*

The thought is unbearable.

He *isn't*- after all, he likes Voldemort more than *a bit of fun*, and he's a half-blood. Sirius has no prejudice based on purity. He truly isn't like the others, he reassures himself, eager to get rid of the notion.

Right, a voice mocks him in his head.

He sighs and draws back, confused.

You should fuck him. If you don't, then you just shared a kiss with Voldemort. That's wrong. Why would you kiss him if you don't plan to fuck him?

"Oh, shut up!" Sirius snaps at himself.

Voldemort doesn't enquire who he is speaking with, just looks at Sirius in that intense way of his.

Sirius sighs, again.

"Thank you," he says, choking up. *See, it was just a gratitude kiss. It doesn't mean anything. Just that I am grateful.*

"Aren't you polite?"

"For James-" Sirius clarifies.

"I know."

Once more, Voldemort runs a hand through Sirius's hair, and Sirius fights the instinct to lean into his touch, to close his eyes and hug him.

But if a kiss is bad, a *hug* with the dark lord is unthinkable.

"Do all people feel as much as you do, I wonder?"

Sirius doesn't know. He's always been highly emotional. But Voldemort doesn't seem to expect an answer.

"You are growing stronger, day by day. Your magic is maturing."

Oh, Sirius wouldn't call it maturing. His magic is *turning* under Voldemort's lessons. His blood is ancient and predisposed to the dark. He's flourishing, really.

"I'm tired," Sirius confesses. He doesn't mean just then. He's just tired all the time lately. Dumbledore seems to have more energy than Sirius these days, and Dumbledore is like a thousand years old.

"I know. You're being pulled in two directions. It hinders you. Let go, Sirius. Let them go. You do not belong there."

"Yes, yes, I know. I belong with my family."

They've had this talk since the moment they met. How Sirius won't be accepted or understood by the Order, how he-

Voldemort cups his jaw, and draws Sirius impossibly closer. "You belong with me."

(-)

“I’m not talking to Remus anymore.” Peter says, eyes wide, when Sirius asks him how the fight at the hospital ended.

He knows James’ side of it, who was sent home hours later, declared in good health, but he doesn’t know Remus’ and James looked too angry to speak about it when Sirius saw him in the morning.

“How did you figure I would? James isn’t talking to him either. Only Lily, but that’s Lily for you.”

“You don’t need to be upset on my behalf-”

“I think I do.” Peter shrugs. “I’m not talking to him anymore, mate. I know James is your number one and all, but you’re my number one. My best friend. Fuck Remus.”

Sirius groans, lounges on Peter’s couch, playing with one of Mrs Pettigrew yarns. “Listen, Pete, he doesn’t know I’m a spy. Put yourself in his place, it does look suspicious.”

Sirius is still furious with Remus, but he knows Remus has all the reasons to act the way he did. Besides, he doesn’t want Remus all alone, with no friends.

Peter swallows a few times, head lowered. “It’s suspicious even knowing you’re a spy,” he whispers.

Sirius’ heart thunders in his chest. He drops the yarn. Peter won’t meet his eyes.

“Are you? Are you still just a spy?” Peter asks the floor.

“What makes you ask that?” Sirius’ voice comes out too high for his taste. “What was it that-”

“Don’t worry. James is blind to it, as usual. But I don’t have as much luck pulling a wool over my own eyes. I’m not judging. I’m just asking.”

Peter *should* be judging, really. If he thinks Sirius truly had gone that way, he should be judging. But he doesn’t; he hadn’t when the Snape thing happened, the only one of his friends to stay by Sirius’ side in those dark months.

And that is why Sirius is not pissed off with the question. That is why he doesn’t blow off, even if he would have if Remus had been the one asking.

“I’m not sure, some days,” Sirius answers and Peter’s eyes snap back up to meet Sirius’.

Mrs Pettigrew loudly announces lunch is ready, and they both go to join her in the kitchen that smells awful. They’re grateful for the interruption as they clear away the smoke she caused, while reassuring her the meal is delicious.

They don’t speak of it again.

(-)

Sirius makes use of Legilimency, holding his wand tightly, hidden under his leather jacket that covers his lap.

He's not exactly comfortable; sadly, it's not violating the privacy of the surrounding muggles that brings the unease, but what he means to do, *after*.

It's fine, he tells himself. *It's for educational purposes.*

He really can't fathom why he's apparently fine with fucking Voldemort, but the thought of doing it with another man brings back the old shame.

Sirius ignores whatever complicated feeling plague him, and he focuses on his task.

He prods at the minds of those staring at him- and there are many- until he finally makes his choice.

He picks one that wants to be fucked, has no interest in doing the fucking. A *bottom*, Sirius learned the term from his mind. These muggles and their obsession with labelling every little thing about themselves…

Going into the minds of those around him comforted him- he thought he was the only one with complicated feelings, ones that make no sense, but he is not. Plenty men out there feel the same shame he does. One poor lad is so disgusted with himself for having these *urges*, as he thinks of them, that Sirius almost goes to him to tell him it's alright. He can't fathom why some muggles would be so conflicted about wanting to fuck other muggle men- after all, they aren't Blacks, they aren't Heirs to a noble, ancient house. They're regular people, with insignificant families. *Why do they care so much?*

Something about sin, about society- Sirius doesn't pay that much attention- it's irrelevant to him, after all.

The one he picks is not ashamed at all. Medium height, athletic, black hair. Pretty enough. Sirius puts his wand back in his trousers, picks his leather jacket up and heads to him.

It takes about ten minutes to charm him.

Even if this bloke has no contradictory feelings about what he likes, he still doesn't want his neighbours to know of his preferences, and Sirius certainly can't Apparate him to his own house, so he takes him to a hotel.

"You're not a serial killer, are you?" the man- Sirius thinks his name is Tobey- asks, when they enter the room.

“I’m not,” he assures him, though what an odd time to ask about that, once he’s already trapped with Sirius in a room.

Who *is* a murderer, but Sirius doesn’t like thinking about that. Parkinson’s head flying through the air still plagues his dreams occasionally.

The poor muggles, too, from when Rodolphus made him attend ‘the hunt’ as he called it. Briefly, he wonders if Snape made peace with that night.

He distracts himself with the mini refrigerator in the room. Muggles have the best inventions. There are tiny bottles inside it, and Sirius takes one, offers maybe-Tobey one, too.

Sirius made sure not to drink too much; if he had, he wouldn’t be so conflicted, but then if he were drunk, he wouldn’t be able to learn stuff.

That’s why he’s doing this. He’s determined to make Voldemort come. It consumes Sirius, that he hadn’t so far. He can’t stop thinking about it.

Maybe there’s a secret to it, some trick Sirius doesn’t know, so he’s here to learn it.

It is not as titillating as fucking Voldemort. It’s sex, so it’s good, especially once his prick is properly hard and it’s easier to push aside his mother’s voice in his head.

But he does not experience the thrill he gets with Voldemort. Not even close. And he knows it would be even better if the stubborn arsehole would come, too.

“Why won’t you let me?” Sirius asked, frustrated, the last time they fucked. *“You must have touched yourself, at least. You know it’s good.”*

“I do not enjoy it.”

Sirius frowns. Impossible.

“It leaves me vulnerable; robs me of my judgement. I do not wish to be ruled by my body.”

Well, that’s the fucking point, Sirius almost says. To get away from life and hide in pleasure for a while.

“Once. Try it once, with me,” Sirius says.

“Why is it so important for you?”

“It’s how it goes. Un unwritten rule. Both partners should get something out of it,” Sirius coaxes.

“That’s not entirely true.” Voldemort lifts an eyebrow. “Even I know it seldomly goes that way.”

Merlin knows who’s mind Voldemort’s been violating to gain that knowledge. Maybe frigid housewives of his Death Eaters that would rather jump off a bridge than sleep with their

husbands.

Sirius sighs, decides to be honest. "It's important for my ego. I want to make you come for me."

"To control me through my body. Exactly my point."

"I already do. I'm fucking you."

Voldemort smiles. "I'm allowing you to. There's only the illusion of control. "

Sirius bites his lips. "Yes. Hence, I want you to give me something genuine. That you have little control over."

"That's not a healthy mentality, Sirius, is it?" Voldemort mocks him.

Apparently, there's nothing wrong with Sirius' techniques. Maybe-Tobey comes with no issues, bent over the bed, trembling all over. Sirius took note of what the man liked best, what made him moan so loudly it's a wonder no one knocked on their door, but then that doesn't mean Voldemort will like it.

After all, not all the women he fucked liked the same things, either.

Still, Sirius shelves this experience in his head, to draw upon at a later date.

He will make Voldemort come, if it's the last thing he does.

(-)

On the list of things he never thought he'd do, taking Narcissa to Paris on a muggle boat would have ranked pretty high.

A private muggle boat, steered by one of the many squibs Lucius uses when he has a need of them, but still.

"Do you truly hate British fashion this much?" Sirius asks her, holding her hair as she throws up over board.

"Yes," she responds, resolutely, managing to be graceful even half bent over the rails the way she is.

She can't Apparate or use a Portkey, what with the human developing inside her, so there are no other ways to get to Paris. Well, Sirius offered flying her there on his bike, but Lucius looked like he had a stroke when he heard the idea.

Narcissa should have gone with Bellatrix, what with Lucius being busy with a Wizengamot meeting, but the irritating peacock determined two women alone in muggle Paris would 'most certainly meet trouble'.

Never mind that they'll only be in muggle Paris for ten minutes.

Sirius likes to blame Lucius for his predicament, and he does, but then Lucius wouldn't be acting crazy if Narcissa would just accept to buy British robes, or wear the thousand French one she already owns.

"They don't fit me anymore," she complained, when Sirius pointed it out.

"You haven't gained a pound!"

"The new season robes are out! I can't be seen with the ones from the last season."

Sirius wanted to strangle her, but then he always had a hard time saying 'no' to her, and, on top of that, these are the duties of a Guardian. He needs to guard the kid, when his father isn't available, and the kid is momentarily inside Narcissa.

They make it through muggle Paris without any incident, just Narcissa's running commentary about how awful muggles are, as they pass through them.

But she does enjoy having an excuse to wear what must be an insanely expensive muggle dress and fur coat.

And then the hunt for robes begins, once they cross into the magical side. Lucius, as always, told her she can have anything she wants, and she takes that quite literally.

She's well known in every store she drags him through; there is always a lickspittle there, to bow at her feet. 'Madame Malfoy' is stuck into Sirius brain after the first hour.

"You already bought that," Sirius says, bored, when Narcissa orders a man to send six gold candlesticks to the Manor.

"Oh, I did? Well, can't hurt to have more."

Narcissa never had much limits; when they used to go shopping as children- or he was a kid and she was an adolescent- Narcissa wasn't allowed near anything if her father wasn't there to reign her in.

She's like a niffler on muggle drugs.

"He has this exact same model," Sirius says, when she picks a watch for Lucius.

"No. Look, this one has a different clasp."

Lucius has a hundred watches, he won't have time to wear them all in his lifetime.

But Narcissa likes to buy gifts for her husband, with his own money. Lucius always pretends to love everything she hands him.

She buys Sirius a watch too, and he's completely ignored when he tries to protest.

And then she buys a watch for her *son*. "For when he'll turn seventeen," she tells the man behind the counter, who just blinks at her, and then pretends this is normal behaviour.

Sirius goes outside for a smoke so he won't slap her. A woman hits on him within three minutes, and his mood improves. French girls are far more relaxed, compared to proper, stiff English roses.

She's quite attractive, too, but Sirius is stuck with his rabid niffler, who most certainly will murder him if he abandons her there.

Nevertheless, he watches the woman go, eyeing her perky arse. He watches her as she gets inside a boutique.

And then his eyes fall on a robe.

A beautiful midnight robe, high collared, with purple patterns moving around the hems.

It looks positively royal. Intimidating, even just hanging on a lifeless mannequin.

Sirius makes his way there, admiring it through the window. There is no price attached to it, but then most of the stores in that area don't have prices attached. If one needs to know it beforehand, they aren't wealthy enough to shop there.

"Oh, that's interesting," Narcissa says, startling him. She grabs his cigarette and throws it on the ground, crushing it under her boot. "I can't decide if it's a formal robe or a combat robe." She gives it an appreciative glance. "The patterns seem formal, but the style is ambiguous. You want it?"

"No."

"I'll get it for you-"

"Cissa, for the love of all that is sacred, please don't make me cry in public. Can we eat? I'm sure the baby is hungry or would like for his mother to sit down for five seconds."

She rolls her eyes. "The baby has no brain to want much of anything."

"Then he certainly doesn't need a watch, does he?" Sirius mutters, managing to steer her away from that boutique and straight into another.

By the time he's back in England, he's exhausted. Cissa managed to tire him more than a duel with Voldemort.

See, that is how we can win the war. Send Voldemort shopping with her for a day, and he'll drop dead by nightfall.

He sleeps soundlessly, wakes up bright and early the next day, gets on his bike and heads back to Paris.

It was, after all, a very nice robe.

It feels nice, too, when he's allowed to touch it. Silk velvet, many layers of it.

"Every fibre is charmed during the sewing process," the man working there assures Sirius.

The purple patterns were actually amethysts.

"I want one with rubies and black onyx."

He's taken to see their selection of gems, and he picks the darkest ruby on display.

"And you are sure abut the measurements?" the man asks. "These robes can't be transfigured even for an inch-"

"I am sure." Sirius always had a good eye for measurements, after growing up with Narcissa and seeing her buy clothes. "I want the gems on the hems, and some on the collar, too. A more discrete approach. Resembling a snake pattern."

The man writes everything down. He convinces Sirius to get more charms added to it: self cleaning, wrinkle deterrent charm, protection from minor curses, anti-tearing and so forth.

It goes well into thousands of galleons.

But it is, after all, a very nice robe. *Very nice*.

It takes them two weeks to make it. When he finally has it, he sneaks it to Voldemort's house in a backpack, hoping those anti wrinkle charms will do their work, and hangs it in the dresser amongst all the black simple robes, as Voldemort cooks dinner.

He's dying to see Voldemort in some sort of colour. The man looks smashing in black and his occasional white shirts, but red-

Fuck, red would go perfectly with his eyes.

(-)

If he was in any state to worry, he would be concerned that these days no one arouses him quite like Voldemort. He still goes out and fucks random women every week, but it's getting less and less enjoyable and his mind often drifts to Voldemort when he's with them.

But he can't worry about that now, on top of the man himself. They fuck far less than Sirius would want to. Mostly Tuesdays, after their duels and dinner, but not every Tuesday. Not that

Voldemort ever rejected him, but Sirius is starting to feel self-conscious over always being the one to initiate; he doesn't want to seem desperate, so sometimes he just leaves after dinner, pretending he's unbothered.

Yet he has him now, and that's all that matters in the moment.

Sirius wants to devour him- he can't explain it, can't make sense of the need that took root inside him, of how much Voldemort affects him and makes him mad with want, leaves his skin burning, his cock aching with anticipation.

I like the closeness of it, Voldemort once said, and Sirius is starting to understand.

It feels close; intimate. Sex with Voldemort is unlike any other sex he ever had, because it means *something*; he's not sure what, but it has meaning, something deeper than getting his cock wet, than the pleasure of an orgasm.

It feels like something magical; not in the way muggles use the word to describe a fairy-tale type of feeling, no. Like *actual* magic, that lingers over every inch of Voldemort's skin, as if he's made purely of magic.

Sirius finds that scarred, thin, almost malnourished body more and more perfect with every encounter. He's in awe of it, of the way it can sustain such dark runes, such power. Intoxicating.

And Voldemort's eyes, more black than his usual red in such instances, yet still focused and intelligent and hungry, looking at Sirius as if he sees every single part of him and approves of it….

It's pleasurable, and passionate, and yet peaceful. Sirius could spend days in that bed.

When he's on his own sad mattress, in his cold, empty house, he wanks thinking of Voldemort; after he comes, and he tries to sleep, he thinks he is in Voldemort's bed.

Strange, how that became a safe place, in such a short amount of time. How it became a sanctuary where no one can hurt him, where not even Sirius can hurt himself. Where he doesn't feel the need to hurt.

He's enthralled with how responsive Voldemort is, even in that quiet way of his; how quickly he became sure of himself when they have sex, as if he's been fucking his entire life.

Too sure of himself, Sirius thinks, when those long fingers grip Sirius' shoulders a little too tightly, when he almost turns Sirius over on the bed.

Some unease cuts through his arousal. It's the second time it happens; the second time Voldemort attempts to *flip* them over.

Sirius doesn't tolerate it, as he hadn't the last time, shrugs Voldemort's hands off him.

And Voldemort allows that, easily, seamlessly, becomes pliant once more, but Sirius knows that won't last forever, will it?

Don't think of it now, he tells himself, and Voldemort makes it easy for him to forget it.

(-)

He thinks of it, later, in a pub.

He tries to detangle his feelings on the matter, why he doesn't want Voldemort to fuck him.

Is it because I don't want him to dominate me?

Could be. But then, that makes no sense- he's been fucking Voldemort for a couple of months, and Sirius isn't dominating him. Sure, he likes to pretend he does, but he knows he isn't.

He doesn't think Voldemort is *less* because he's the one getting fucked, but he knows Sirius would feel less, would feel ashamed if he was the one with a cock up his arse.

He shudders, only thinking about it.

Why? That's insane.

It's not like he'd think that about anyone else. He didn't think that about maybe-Tobey. He doesn't think that about the women he fucks.

Then why would I feel that way? Why is he holding himself to different standards?

"When you get out of that door, your behaviour reflects on our entire family, Sirius. You represent every single one of us. Always remember that," his father told him, when he was no older than six.

Sirius huffs, downs a shot of vodka.

Yet he's been behaving badly, in a way his family wouldn't approve, for years now.

Why would this be different? Not to mention there would be no one there to observe it, except Voldemort.

He had no problems fucking Voldemort, after all. He's sure his family wouldn't approve of that, either.

"I am so fucked up," he tells the poor bartender. "I'm a moron."

"More?" the man offers, grabbing the bottle.

"Definitely," Sirius agrees.

(-)

Dora's face lightens up once Sirius explains he lied to her teacher and there is no emergency.

They're in front of her muggle school, so Sirius discreetly casts a warming charm on her clothes.

"But how did you convince Miss Jones to let me out? And won't she tell mummy?"

"Magic is a wonderful thing," Sirius says with a grin. "She won't tell anyone. So if your mum finds out, I know I'll have you to blame!"

"I'm not a snitch!"

"You better not be," he warns, as he hops on the bike. The engine roars to life underneath him.

"And you're not supposed to ask me to lie to mama," she points out, attempting to climb behind Sirius.

"None of that, you're riding up front. Don't wanna lose you on the way. Now, *that* would be bad." He helps her hop on, and even if she is securely pressed against his chest, he casts a sticking charm at her, too, gluing her to the bike. "Also, if you wanna be a good kid and not lie to your mum, you can just turn around and go back to school-"

"Oh, shut up! Let's go!"

Dora had always loved riding with him, ever since Sirius first convinced a reluctant Andromeda to allow him to take Dora around the street for a spin.

But now there's no Andromeda to keep an eye on him and yell 'slower' every other second.

Dora shrikes with joy. "FASTER!" she demands, and he complies.

She's a brave, adventurous kid. A Black, through and through, despite Andromeda's attempts to make her something else, despite Ted's attempts to tame this little wild creature.

When Sirius deems it safe to take flight, out of sight on a deserted road, Dora's laughers is contagious, and he laughs along, almost getting back that childish glee he felt the first time he flew on the bike.

It's a calm ride- for his standards, at least- but it's the best he had in a while, simply because of Dora's delight at everything.

Everyone wants to get somewhere, needs to do something, always in a hurry. It's depressing, really. But Dora is still young enough to simply enjoy the ride for what it is, no destination, no hurry, no purpose. Just fun.

She'd keep going, and he would, too, only he has to be responsible and feed her, eventually, so he finds a private spot to land on.

She especially appreciates the landing, shrieking loudly as they descend.

She wants to eat at that McDonalds *thing*- because he won't call it a restaurant-so he takes her to one.

"A bit cold for a child to be on a bike, isn't it?" a woman asks, disapproving, in the parking lot. "Not to mention she's a tad too young for a bik-"

"Mind your business," Sirius snaps at her.

These muggles, honestly…nosy and concerned about a complete stranger's affairs.

"I'm actually hot!" Dora backs him up, chin pointed up, a hand on her hip, and she looks so much like Bellatrix that air gets trapped in his chest for a second.

She would be hot, what with the warming charm, he thinks, and he takes the charm off, just to do something to distract himself from the similarities.

Isn't that why you wanted to spend time with her, though? a stupid, traitorous part of his brain asks. *You miss that murderous bitch, Andromeda doesn't want to see you, so you only have Dora to fill the gap.*

Sirius ignores his thoughts. He actually came to make sure Dora has some fun in her life. To make sure she remembers she's of good wizarding stock.

She's trapped in that muggle school, trapped in muggle London, distanced from the magical world and Sirius doesn't think it's fair on her.

"When was the last time you went to Diagon?" Sirius asks her when they have their 'food' and sit at a booth.

Dora shrugs. "Daddy takes me sometimes."

"I know. But when?"

She shrugs again, and Sirius grits his teeth together.

"Tell you what, love. I'll come back tomorrow and take you to Diagon, yeah? We don't have much time left today, so-"

"Mum and Dad argue about it often. She doesn't want me to go there."

"Well, we won't tell her, will we?"

She grins at him. "Another lie? But that's bad! It's illegal to lie to your parents."

Sirius huffs. He remembers his mum saying that to him when he was very young, too. Sadly for her, Sirius never believed it.

“Blacks are above the law,” he says. “We can do whatever we want.”

“I want a Barbie, then. A *real* Barbie, not the cheap dolls.”

“I’ll get you ten.” Whatever those Barbies are.

Satisfied, she eats in silence for a while, making a mess everywhere, knocking over her drink, dropping her sauce all over her jumper. *The clumsiness comes from Ted’s side,* Sirius thinks. Blacks are many things, but not clumsy.

“Sirius?”

“Yes?”

She bites her cheek, puts her half-eaten burger away. “Do you know mum’s sisters?”

“Of course I know them.”

“Can you tell me about them? I know so little! Just that she has three-”

“Three?”

She nods, raises her hand, and puts a finger down. “There’s Cissa. She’s blonde - Mama has a picture of her hidden in the attic.” She puts another finger down. “Bella. Mama mentioned her when I got sick last month. She gave me tea and sang to me a special song that Bella sang to her when mama was sick, and she got all better.” She lowers a third finger. “And Bellatrix. She-”

“Bella and *Bella*trix?” Sirius asks with a smile.

“Yes, keep up, silly!” Dora says, irritated at being interrupted.

“Sorry, go on.”

“Anyway, Bellatrix must be an Auror or just very scary.”

“Oh, she’s scary, alright,” Sirius mutters.

“Last time mama took me to Diagon, a man cornered us and started yelling at mama that she’s a traitor, that she should die, and I’m an abomination-what is abomination?”

It’s a wonder Sirius’ teeth don’t break to pieces the way he’s grinding them. *“What?”*

“It was pretty scary. He was so mad! And then another man came, and it got worse, but mama held her head up and said that if they don’t leave us alone, she’ll write to her sister, Bellatrix. The men left really quickly after that. And they were *huuuge*, Sirius! So big and bearded! But they got scared when they heard Bellatrix’ name. Anyway, mama never took me to Diagon

again after that, and she refused to tell me more about Bellatrix, but I remember. One day I will be an Auror, too, and I'll defend mama from these screaming men."

"Do you know who those men were? Did Andy mention names?" Sirius demands, trying to sound calm.

She shakes her head, wild hair flying everywhere. "She just said that people don't like that she and daddy are together and that I have to ignore it. I'm used to it already, I told you they call daddy a mudblood and apparently mama is a traitor. Is that why my aunts never come to visit?"

Sirius buys her more food, in an attempt to shut her up. He's torn between facing Andromeda's wrath, were she to find out Sirius took Dora out of school after she prohibited Sirius to be around her, and between a burning desire to take Dora straight home and find out who dared scream and threaten his cousin, because he really wants to pay them a visit.

In the end, he can't make himself face Andromeda. *Can you blame her for not wanting a Death Eater around her child? She probably thinks you're mates with whoever cornered her in Diagon.*

But no, she can't think that. Sirius might have a Mark on his arm, like Bellatrix does, but that doesn't mean they will ever forget Andy shares their blood, no matter who she married. Clearly Andromeda knows this, since she used Bella's name to make those morons leave her alone.

Still, he's too ashamed to meet Andromeda's eyes.

He does take Dora out of school again the following day- she doesn't need stupid Muggle school, anyway- and takes her to Diagon. And then to Knockturn. He parades her around all the shops, daring someone to say something.

Of course, no one does. Some look their way, it must be clear this girl that has Black features can only be Andy's child, but Sirius wants them to look. Wants everyone to know Dora is under his protection.

And it's highly unlikely Andromeda will ever find out Dora was there; after all, none of her former Slytherin friends talk to her anymore. *No one* talks to Andromeda anymore, no one keeps her updated on what is going on in the world she left behind.

Sirius' heart bleeds for her.

Was it worth it? he wonders. *Was Ted worth losing everything?*

Sirius can't help but resent him. He sees all this as being Ted's fault. He knows, in theory, that it's everyone else's fault- that *they* drove Andromeda away, but Sirius loves or is friends with 'they'. He grew up with those people. He doesn't love Ted, so it's easier to blame him.

(-)

“You have to stay hidden,” Sirius whispers, shoving Regulus under his bed. “Promise me you’ll stay hidden.”

“But why? I want to get out and play-”

“No! You can’t! It’s too dangerous for you. Stay here! Promise me!”

Regulus hugs his dragon toy, closer to his chest. “Alright,” he agrees. “I trust you, Sirius. If you say I have to stay here, I will. But you’ll come back for me, yes? You won’t forget I’m here?”

“I’ll come back when it’s safe.”

Sirius stands, throws a big blanket over the bed, that reaches the floor, hoping it will discourage people from looking under the bed. He wants to drag the armoire in front of the bed, for extra protection, but he’s too small. He can’t do it, so he abandons the plan.

It’s not enough. It’s not safe enough. *I need to find Father.*

Of course! His father! Why hadn’t Sirius thought about him before? His shoulders sag with relief. He only needs to find Father and everything will be alright.

He gets out of Regulus’ room, closing it softly behind him. The house is dark- there are no candles lit- why? *Why is it so dark?* It feels like someone is dying in it.

He shudders. *Father.* He needs to get to his father.

On the second floor, he hears voices. Sirius creeps closer, sees his mother fighting with Uncle Cygnus and grandfather Arcturus.

Maybe they’ll know where Father is. But Sirius doesn’t dare ask- they don’t like him very much. They’ll scream at him, berate him, point out everything he’s doing wrong, and he doesn’t have the time for it. He needs to make sure no one finds Regulus.

He descends to the next floor- the house-elves heads, mounted on the wall stare at him.

Where is Kreacher? Sirius thinks. “Kreacher?” he asks. “Kreacher, take me to Father.”

But the disobedient elf doesn’t show up.

The first floor is very noisy.

So many people. *What is going on?* Narcissa is playing with a doll in a corner, cradling it as if it’s a baby. She tries to put it in a crib, but it’s too high, she can’t reach it.

And is that James? And Lily? Further away in the room, by one of portraits.

“Hey.” Sirius goes to them. “Hey, have you seen Father around?”

“Not now, Sirius,” James says, not even looking at him. “I’m busy.”

“I need to find Father-”

“I need to take care of Lily and the baby.” They have a doll too, much like Narcissa.

Sirius is so confused. Why is James playing with dolls? He usually plays with Snitches and Quaffles at school. But now he’s holding a doll, and he’s ignoring Sirius. It hurts. And when did Lily start talking to him? She hates James.

Remus isn’t there. Sirius looks around, but he can’t find Remus anywhere. He spots Peter, hiding under a table. He looks so scared- Sirius should go check on him, but he needs to get to his father, so he can make all this madness stop already.

Why are all these people in my house? What’s going on? And no one likes him. Even James is busy with Lily. He has no support.

Rabastan yells at James, pointing at an empty chair. “You took something from us,” he tells James. “So now you owe us someone back!”

Sirius goes to the chair- it’s wet. It’s bloody. *Evan* is written on it.

Rodolphus is drinking in a corner, and Sirius goes to him. He’s an adult- maybe he can help.

Sirius pulls at his sleeve, looks up at him. He’s so damn tall. Sirius can’t wait to grow up so he won’t have to look up at him.

“Have you seen Father?”

“Not for a while, no. I don’t think you’ll find him, kid.”

It makes Sirius prickle with unease. Where is his father? Doesn’t he know something strange is going on? There are people in their home, and they’re all fighting- why isn’t he there to stop it?

What if Father isn’t here? He must be away- after all, if he was there, he wouldn’t have allowed for this. No one would dare act this way is his father was home.

Now everyone is really fighting. They’re throwing food at each other; everyone is so angry, and he asks them to stop, it’s his birthday after all, they’re all his friends- he wants them to get along. Why are they so determined to ruin his party? Why can’t they all be friends? But no one listens to him- no one hears him.

“Bella!” he yells, seeing her black curls in the distance. He runs to her, happy to have an ally. She’ll help him, he’s sure. She always helps him.

But when he reaches her, she pushes him, shoves him hard, and he falls to the floor. It hurts. Why would Bella do that? It makes no sense. She never caused him pain, but now he hurts so badly. He’d fallen on some debris- there’s red hair sticking out from underneath the rubble, a pale hand with red nails and Sirius’ breath hitches- he can’t breathe.

He gets up and runs. “Father!” he calls. “Father, where are you?”

“Sirius!” That’s Professor Dumbledore’s voice. *What is he doing here?*

He looks around but he can’t see the headmaster anywhere.

“Sirius, stop! Don’t go that way. Come to me!”

I don’t like you, Sirius thinks, though he likes Dumbledore, doesn’t he? He’s always nice to Sirius at school, convinces McGonagall to get them out of detention.

“Come to me! Don’t go down that path!”

Sirius ignores him.

Frantically, he whirls around Grimmauld’s halls, terrified. Everything is *wrong*, the world had gone crazy. He needs his father.

Finally, Sirius reaches the office door. He stands on his toes so he can grab the doorknob. He opens it and light spills out of the room.

Sirius enters it quickly, breathing in relief. When he turns to close the door, he no longer needs to stand on his toes. He’s tall and strong, and when the door shuts, the screams from the rest of the house get muffled.

“Fuck,” he says. “It’s madness out there.”

Voldemort looks up from his desk, and Sirius walks around the room, calming his wildly beating heart. He runs his fingers over the piano, and that relaxes him further.

“Ignore it,” Voldemort says, putting his book away. He gestures for Sirius to take a seat, and Sirius throws himself on the small couch. He really should buy Voldemort a better couch.

“Can’t you just make it stop?” he asks Voldemort. “I know you can make it all go away.”

“Why would I?”

Sirius sighs. “It’s just that I don’t like it. Everyone is fighting, and it’s wrong. I want it to go away. I was looking all over for you, but I couldn’t find you. I didn’t know your house is so close to mine.”

Voldemort stands, walks around the desk, sits besides Sirius.

“You can’t hear them when you’re here, can you?”

Sirius frowns. Now that he mentions it- he can’t hear a thing, even if he did, earlier. The voices died down.

“But I’ll have to get back there eventually,” he says, uncertain.

“Why? You can stay here and forget all about it. Go on, play something for me.”

Voldemort hands him his guitar.

“No,” Sirius says. “No, this song was meant for the piano.”

“Even better. Go ahead, play. I’ll be in the kitchen. You seem hungry.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to-” Sirius gestures to the door, but it’s no longer there. The only door he finds is the one to Voldemort’s bedroom. He frowns. “I’d rather you make them all stop,” he says. “I know you can do it. You’re the only one that can put an end to this.”

“They don’t matter.”

“I didn’t feel safe back there. It was chaos. And no one seems to see me. No one had time for me. They wouldn’t listen-”

“You’re safe here.” Voldemort stands, helps Sirius up from the couch. “Play something. From that Freddie you like so much.”

Sirius does feel safe. In fact, he can’t really remember what upset him so before.

He feels more lighthearted when he sits at the piano, runs his fingers through the scales.

“Too late, my time has come,
Sends shivers down my spine, body’s aching all
The time
Goodbye, everybody, I’ve got to go,
Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth
Mama, oooh
I don’t want to die,
I sometimes wish I’d never been born at all.”

Sirius wakes up with a start, drenched in sweat, on his mattress. He’s already sitting, hand on his heart.

That was so fucked up, he thinks, as it dawns on him it was all a dream.

That’s it. I’m never taking muggle drugs again. Ever again.

(-)

It’s a large meeting-the first one Sirius attends. They’re all masked; he thinks there are around two hundred people there.

Sirius wasn’t actually invited- more like he invited himself. At one of their semi-regular card game nights, he overheard Avery and Rabastan talking about a huge gathering. Apparently

Voldemort holds them once in a while, because it's the only time the lower ranking Death Eaters actually get to lay eyes on him.

"Why can't I come to this meeting?" Sirius asked Voldemort, the following night, on an impulse.

He expected Voldemort to say 'because you're a spy'. In fact, he didn't expect Voldemort would pay him any mind at all.

"I don't think it would be to your taste," Voldemort said, instead.

Sirius argued Voldemort has no idea what his tastes are.

"Suit yourself, then. I will call you."

And so he did; Sirius' Mark burned, and he allowed himself to Apparate wherever it is the Mark led him to.

It's dead silent. He can't imagine how a place packed with so many people can be this quiet, but he can hear birds singing from outside the abandoned building they're currently standing in.

He sees Rodolphus' intricate mask, and Sirius shoulders his way to his side. Rabastan is there, too.

"I'm so hungover," Rabastan whispers, and even if his voice is distorted by the mask, Sirius can still hear the whine in it.

Sirius is rather excited. He looks around, trying to recognise other people. There are so many. And these can't be all of them, Sirius knows. Voldemort dropped enough hints, as did Bella when they still talked, that Voldemort has plenty of older supporters too, ones that aren't even marked, but are definitely in his corner.

For their small world, two hundred Marked wizards is a decent army. That's not even counting the werewolves.

Alas, his excitement doesn't last long.

When Voldemort shows up, everyone kneels at once, dropping to one knee around him like puppets. Sirius remains standing and Voldemort glares at him.

This is a different Voldemort than the one from the cabin. Different even from the one that holds meetings in Lestrange Manor with a handful of men.

There is no glimpse of humanity on his face, no sign of approachability. There is no amusement in his eyes when he stares at Sirius.

Rabastan's elbow connects with Sirius' knee.

Rodolphus simply grabs Sirius' robe and pulls.

It might be the pure pressure in the air, it might be the fact that Rodolphus caught him unguarded, or it might just be that Voldemort is a frankly *terrifying* presence, even if Sirius somehow forgot it along the way- it might be many things. Sirius will never be sure, but he doesn't resist Rodolphus' grip, and he, too, lets himself fall to one knee.

He freezes - it's not something that happens often to him. When he's angry, he shows it. When he's afraid, he gets aggressive. When he's insulted, he causes a scene.

But right then he just freezes, a chill in his bones, a loud ringing in his ears.

He can't even focus on what Voldemort is saying.

Blacks don't kneel, a voice keeps yelling in his head, his father's voice, far clearer than Voldemort's.

(-)

He goes on a drunken rampage for a week straight, fucking everything with a skirt, snorting muggle drugs, recklessly flying his bike.

"I don't want to talk," he tells James, over the Floo. "I'm sorry, I just don't."

He sends a Patrons to Dumbledore at some point that he's alive, but busy.

Sirius drinks and gets high and does not plan on stopping anytime soon, not even when the Mark burns, at first just an itch, but as the days pass it intensifies until it burns so hotly Sirius submerges his arm in freezing water, when no magic can soothe the pain. It's excruciating.

He just takes more drugs.

(-)

He's somewhat clearheaded for the first time in a week, sitting in his living room, blasting Led Zeppelin in his headphones, tinkering with his bike. He can't remember how he got the bike inside his living room, but he's not very concerned about it. Not like he has any furniture he could damage, just a table on which many bottles of whiskey rest. The mark had stopped burning hours before.

Just as he thinks he found a way to put a new charm on the engine, a shiver goes down his spine, an instinctive warning that he's being watched. He stands and turns in one fluid motion, wand pointed out.

Voldemort is watching him from the doorway.

The fury he tried to bury during the past week comes back with a vengeance, burning hotter than any Dark Mark.

Seconds pass, and Sirius keeps his battle stance, music roaring in his ears.

The temptation to curse Voldemort is so incredibly strong. Almost as strong as the part of him that's glad to see him. Almost, but not quite.

Eventually he puts his wand in his pocket, turns his back to Voldemort because he just can't bear to look at him anymore, and takes the headphones off.

"I see you still haven't learned to knock," he says, sitting on the floor and taking hold of the screwdriver.

"I did," that voice comes from behind him. "You didn't answer."

Sirius tightens a loose screw. "When someone doesn't answer the door, it's not an invitation to come in."

"What are those things? Muggle pilots used to wear them in the war. They cancel noise or-?"

Voldemort is now in his line of sight, looking at the headphones on the floor.

"For music."

A brief silence. "I don't understand."

Sirius hands them over, one handed, the other checking a piece of his engine.

He looks up to see Voldemort examining them curiously, before placing them close to his ear. Led Zeppelin is still singing, unaware of who is listening.

"Why not listen the proper way?"

"It's useful when I ride, or just feel like walking around."

"It's a sure way to get killed if you can't hear someone approaching." Voldemort places the headphones on the cluttered table, full of ashtrays and empty bottles.

"What do you want?" Sirius asks, all out of pleasantries. He stands and wipes his oily hands on his jeans.

Voldemort regards him cooly. "You cannot ignore my Mark."

"I'm not your lackey," Sirius spits. It's far easier to act out now, because this isn't the Voldemort from the meeting. This one looks human, like the man that cooks dinner for Sirius. "I'm not your servant. I do not kneel."

Voldemort looks frustrated. But not angry. “And I allow you far too much leeway, in private or around your family. But in public-“

Sirius grits his teeth. “I mind myself when others are present. I always did.”

“You challenged my authority at the meeting.”

“I fucking kneeled, didn’t I?” Even Sirius’ hair is angry. A strand falls stubbornly in his face, obscuring his view, and Sirius pushes it behind his ear. “I’m a Black! I don’t grovel at anyone’s feet. I’d rather *die*. Would you ever kneel for anyone? No, I bet you wouldn’t. And yet you made me do it.”

“I cannot show you preferential treatment. I already do-”

“You might be smarter, stronger, wiser. Whatever the fuck. But that doesn’t make you better than I.”

“Such a proud creature you are.”

Sirius snorts. “Look who’s talking.”

Voldemort advances closer. “I am not Dumbledore. I’m not a bored supervisor at the Ministry or an undemanding owner of a store you work at. You will not ignore me, Sirius. You have my Mark- when I call you, you either come or you better run far away. This is the last time you make me come to collect you.”

“Don’t threaten me!” Sirius threatens.

Or what? What will you do if he threatens you? What will you do if he punishes you? You can’t do anything-

Sirius breathes in deeply, trying to dispel the panic that settled in his chest at that meeting, when he *fully* realised that, unlike anyone else he ever had to deal with, if Voldemort annoys him, or hurts him, there is nothing Sirius can do about it.

“When I call, you come, unless you have a valid reason not to,” Voldemort repeats.

“I have plenty.”

Voldemort takes a step closer, all menace. Sirius doesn’t back away, even if his heart flutters in a panic. “Do you? Are you truly willing to risk your life because you felt humiliated? You were masked. Few knew your identity, and those that did were kneeling, too-“

“You think I care about them?”

Voldemort frowns. “Then?”

“It’s between us,” Sirius spells it out for him. “I don’t want you seeing me kneel for you. I don’t want you making me do it.”

I don't like you having control over me.

He looks at Sirius, head titled, seemingly intrigued. "I see," he almost whispers, that's how low his tone is. "Your obsession to be equal to a man that has no equal. You never once met someone that excelled at everything you fail. You accuse me of acting superior, but you are far too accustomed to be the superior one, in any situation."

Sirius swallows. "Pretty much." No point in lying.

"You do like your illusions, so I assume this is easily fixed," Voldemort says, and a tiny smile finally shows up on his lips.

It's only then that Sirius realises how often Voldemort smiles around him, to the extent that Sirius finds it disconcerting when Voldemort isn't smiling.

"No, it's not, but do amuse me with whatever you can come up wi-"

Voldemort kneels. Right there, in Sirius' empty living room, beside his bike.

Sirius' world shifts. He stares down, gobsmacked. He's hot all over, the hair on his arms stands out, and he feels more euphoria than any alcohol, potion or muggle drug ever gave him.

At that moment, Sirius is on top of the world.

Voldemort looks up at him. "Does this please you?"

He can't even talk. He can only stare.

"Answer me."

"Yes," Sirius says, barely getting the word out.

"Do you think I'm humiliating myself?"

"No." Sirius cannot look away. "No," he repeats. Voldemort is past humiliation. He transcendent it, probably long before Sirius was even born.

"No," Voldemort agrees. "Then why do you feel humiliated if you're the one kneeling?"

Sirius doesn't know. His mind tries to come up with an answer, but he simply cannot think.

"Should I tell you why?" Voldemort doesn't wait for an answer. He stands, as elegant as he'd kneeled. "No one can humiliate you if you know your worth. You can be put in any position, you can be striped of every dignity, but you will never feel humiliated if you know *who* you are. You are the only one with the power to humiliate yourself, no one else can do it. But you don't know your worth, do you? You have no idea who you are, hiding behind your family name, the way you do. You walk around saying you are better than anyone that doesn't share your blood, you behave as if you are my equal, yet deep inside you feel worthless."

It is all so very true, isn't it? Sirius opens his mouth, but no words come out; his mind is reeling, going over everything he just heard. He wants to dispute it, but he can't.

How does he know me so well? Why is he the only one to understand how small and inadequate Sirius feels sometimes, when even his friends, his best friends, his family think Sirius is bursting with confidence?

Voldemort looks at him a few seconds more, before turning and inspecting the bike, tracing it with his wand.

"I'm impressed with the charms; quite advanced work."

Sirius licks his lips, heart still thudding against his ribs. "I'm still working on it. I'm trying to find an expansion charm of sorts, one that would allow me to put in a second engine."

"I liked cars when I was a boy," Voldemort says, circling the bike slowly. "There weren't as many as there are now. And they looked far more impressive than what I've glimpsed in London these days. I remember in Soho, a baron would visit a certain establishment. He had a Bentley; it was black and shiny and the interior appeared incredibly comfortable- all leather. I liked to look at it." He smiles. "I told myself one day I'll be rich and own ten Bentleys."

In his head, Sirius can see little orphaned Tom Riddle spying on rich people, fantasising that one day he'll have as much power. For muggles, wealth is the only expression of power.

It's odd to picture it; Voldemort hadn't always dreamed of leading a war, of bringing destruction to the world. Once, he would have had no way of imagining how powerful he'll grow, not when he didn't even know magic exists.

And that's so strange to ponder; that for the first years of his life *Voldemort*, the most accomplished wizard of the century, had not even known magic was real.

"I don't like cars," Sirius says. "I tried to drive one, but I felt trapped in it."

"A lot of faith these muggles have in metal contraptions speeding around, driven by idiots. To say nothing of airplanes, hurling themselves through the skies in a steel coffin."

"But they sure look nice," Sirius says, touching the shiny handlebars. "Fancy a ride?"

Voldemort laughs, a genuine, startled sound. Sirius smiles at him, already forgetting why he was so furious, not even half an hour before.

"Never."

(-)

After that day, it's far easier for Sirius to kneel for Voldemort in the privacy of the cabin.

Voldemort has no idea what is waiting for him, sat in his armchair, focused on his book, as Sirius plans his attack.

He decides it's best to wait for Voldemort to relax, become completely engrossed in whatever muggle nonsense he's reading. Only then does Sirius stand from the couch and walks nonchalantly towards his target.

It's hard to surprise the dark lord, but Sirius manages.

I'm talented like that, he thinks, choosing to focus on Voldemort's frown when Sirius kneels before him. Easier to focus on that than on the fact he's kneeling.

The frown smoothes, and then those elegant eyebrows shoot up when Sirius parts Voldemort's legs enough to make room for himself between them.

He's never seen Voldemort treat a book so carelessly. He unceremoniously throws it towards the coffee-table beside Sirius. He misses. It falls on the floor.

Sirius acts fast- it's vital with Voldemort. He has this annoying, attractive, fascinating way of getting everything under control swiftly, so Sirius knows time is of the essence here.

Voldemort must really like this kneeling business, the megalomaniac, because he's already hard when Sirius takes him out of his trousers.

Sirius has never sucked cock, but he's had his sucked too many times to count. *Can't be that difficult, can it?*

Turns out it is.

It shouldn't be, but as soon as his tongue flattens under the head of Voldemort's cock and Sirius can taste him, all logic or thoughts of technique fly out of his head.

Clean, a bit salty, and Voldemort's familiar magic taste explode on his tongue.

Sirius didn't spend much time thinking how cock would taste- well, he did spend a *little* time, but who is going to know, really- yet he never imagined he'd like it so much.

Above him, Voldemort makes a noise, and triumph blossoms inside Sirius' chest. It's not much, it's not loud noise, but it's there, and it only emboldens Sirius.

He's sure he's not as good at it as some of the wonderfully skilled people that went down on Sirius, but Voldemort won't know the difference, will he?

Sirius doesn't attempt anything complicated, doesn't take more than he can handle- *perhaps at a later date,* he tells himself- stroking with his fingers what he can't reach with his mouth.

He quickly figures out how to manage the girth, what to do with his tongue, how to keep his teeth from making unwanted contact.

Voldemort's hand comes to rest at the back of his head, but before Sirius can decide if he likes it or not, Voldemort takes it back quickly, as if he hadn't been aware he reached out in the first place.

His other hand is on the armrest, fingers clenched.

And when Sirius draws back for a proper breath and looks up-

Fuck, yeah!

Voldemort stares down at him, but his eyes are a bit glazed. His lips are parted. Not much, there's not even a hint of teeth, but they are parted, and his chest moves when he breathes.

Sirius' cock throbs in his trousers, but Sirius ignores it. *Sorry,* he apologises. *Today is not for you.*

His cock answers with a twitch, unhappy, and Sirius turns his attention back to his task.

He's not leaving that fucking cabin until he makes Voldemort come. Gods be damned, he'll stay there forever if he has to. The carpet is soft and comfortable under his knees, and if Voldemort wants to return to his war, if he wants to do anything else in his life other than sit on that armchair, he'll have to come.

Unfathomable that he won't. Who wouldn't come with Sirius Black on his knees, at their feet?

Sirius grows bolder, a burst of adrenaline and conviction mixing with his arousal.

He'll win this time. Sirius can taste the *victory;* it's right there at the back of his throat, in the shape of Voldemort's precome.

And there's his hand again, on Sirius' head.

Voldemort doesn't do much with it; he doesn't use it to push Sirius down- *he better not, if he doesn't want his cock bitten*- just rests it there, fingers barely flexing in Sirius' hair.

Sirius grabs Voldemort's thigh with the hand that isn't wrapped around Voldemort's cock. He does it so he won't get distracted and touch his own cock that is demanding attention, unused to this selflessness.

Not that Sirius is selfless in this endeavour- he is chasing release and satisfaction, just not the *physical* kind, for once. He just needs to make Voldemort let go.

Sirius is *obsessed* with it.

Another noise comes from above. Deeper this time. Sirius twirls his tongue in the way he just did, and he's rewarded with the same noise again. It travels down his spine, to his abdomen, to his cock.

Even when his jaw starts to ache, Sirius keeps at it. He can ignore any kind of pain. In fact, it feels *good*.

Voldemort cracks. Finally.

His fingers grab Sirius' hair, his cock twitches and throbs, heavy on Sirius' tongue, and then he comes.

Sirius' moan, even muffled, is louder than Voldemort's when it happens.

It does taste like victory; it is a bit bitter, and quite a lot of it, but it taste of *power*. Sirius has power over Voldemort, the ability to get something genuine out of him.

He swallows every drop. He worked hard for it, after all.

If only you'd have worked this hard for other things in your life, a voice reprimands him, but it's weak and Sirius banishes it from his head.

He lets go of Voldemort's softening cock, looks up. He smirks.

"Far more entertaining that your silly book, don't you agree?" he asks.

Voldemort is still breathing a tad on the hard side. He's still staring at Sirius, with that almost unfocused look on his face.

Sirius, lost in his success and very smug about it, forgot about the hand in his hair.

He's reminded of it when Voldemort yanks him up. Sirius hisses, but his body follows and in a confusing, uncoordinated moment, he's straddling Voldemort.

He braces his forearms on the back of the armchair, on either side of Voldemort's head, in an instinctive effort not to crush the much thinner dark lord with his weight, and then he's pulled into a kiss.

They never kissed after sex.

Though, Sirius supposes, when Voldemort works the zipper on his jeans open, this isn't after. Not *yet*.

Sirius would have been content without it, truly, he already got what he wanted, but his cock is delighted with Voldemort's touch.

Another first. They've been fucking for almost two months, and Voldemort never once touched his cock. There was no need, what with Sirius controlling and leading all those-

Wait a second, Sirius thinks. Or attempts to think, but it's hard. Almost as hard as his cock.

And Voldemort's mouth is hot, his tongue licking inside Sirius' mouth, as if searching to taste himself.

You can't let him get the upper hand now. You just had a victory-

The voice is drowned by a feral, primal instinct, and Sirius is thrusting into Voldemort's fist in no time, grinding into him, kissing him. Or being kissed by him.

"Fuck," he groans, when he draws back to breathe, resting his forehead on Voldemort's.

The man has a steady grip. Nothing uncertain or hesitant about it.

He glances between them, and Voldemort's fingers were *meant* to be around his cock, that's how perfect they look there. His left hand, his dominant hand, with the Horcrux glowing ominously, even if their bodies obscure any sort of light in the room.

And that does it. Sirius comes all over those long fingers. It spills on his jeans, too, and on Voldemort's robe.

Most enticingly, a few drops stick to the ring.

I really shouldn't find that so hot.

Yet he does. Oh, how he does.

I'm not the only twisted one, he thinks, when Voldemort lets go of him and lifts his arm.

He, too, is looking at the ring. And the come. His head is tilted, with almost childlike curiosity, and then he brings his hand to his mouth and licks his ring finger.

Sirius swallows, mouth suddenly dry. He can't look away, as Voldemort takes another lick, before the come disappears off his hands and their clothes. He didn't even whisper the spell, he didn't move a fucking finger-

Sirius groans. He tries to be annoyed, but he isn't.

"You really have to outdo me in anything," he snarls, but without much venom.

How is Sirius supposed to top *licking someone's come from a ring that holds parts of his soul*?

"It's in my nature," Voldemort says, with one of the biggest smiles Sirius ever saw on his face.

It does something to him, twists something in his chest, almost painfully. For a second, he can see Tom Riddle and just Tom Riddle. With that smile there, he's devastatingly handsome.

It's almost unbearable to witness it, so Sirius bends to kiss him. He brings one hand up and wraps his fingers in Voldemort's robe.

Is that why he came this time? Not only did I kneel for him, but he got to keep his robe- his armour- and, most importantly, his wand on his person?

An odd thought, but Sirius instantly knows he's on to something.

(-)

When Sirius enters the room, the first thing he sees is a picture of himself snogging Rosmerta.

He grins, a surge of pride overcoming him- he'd dreamed of having her ever since he was thirteen, and it finally happened the other night.

The experience itself wasn't that satisfying- he probably built it up in his head for too many years, but there is triumph that comes from finally achieving a goal.

He's already gotten a note from James that morning *'Lucky, lucky dog. Do not tell Lily I said that!'*

But the pride is swept away by irritation when he sees it is *Rodolphus* that is reading the magazine. He had never seen Rodolphus touch a gossip magazine in all the years he'd known him.

"Interested in Witch Weakly?" Sirius mocks, making his way to the head of the table- not Voldemort's head of the table, but the other one.

The man isn't there yet, just the Lestranges and Lucius.

"Fascinated," Rodolphus drawls, not looking up from the article.

"How was it?" Rabastan inquires. "Tell me quickly before *he* gets here! I've been trying to get her for years!" Rabastan exclaims.

"She's a half-blood," Rodolphus points out. "Careful, little brother, you don't want me to think you're a blood traitor."

"Oh, fuck off." Rabastan rolls his eyes. Even Bellatrix does, sipping away at her tea.

"I have two words for you," Lucius drawls, smirking at Rodolphus. "Helena Daren."

Rodolphus lowers the magazine, eyes already narrowed in irritation.

"I have two words for you. Shut the fuck up!"

"That's more than two wo-" Lucius starts, but trails off when Rodolphus' fingers twitch.

"Who?" Bella perks up. "Who is Helena?" She looks between Lucius and Rodolphus.

"Shut up," Rodolphus growls at Lucius, who opened his mouth again.

“A half-blood,” Rabastan answers, cheerfully, though he moves his chair further away from his brother. “One that Rodolphus fooled around with, briefly.”

“You have a burning desire to live on the streets?” Rodolphus asks him, folding the magazine and placing it on the table.

Right in front of where Voldemort will sit, the image of Sirius and Rosmerta clear to greet him as soon as he will sit down.

You stupid fucker, Sirius thinks, with another sigh.

“OH!!!” Bellatrix gets a predatory look in her eyes. “Is that the one uncle Orion stole from you?”

“As if Orion would have touched a half-blood. No, that one was one of the Bronne girls,” Rabastan says, helpful. “The middle one. The hot one. Reina? Raina-“

“Raighne,” Sirius corrects.

He was eight years old, taken along to a party, because he begged his father not to leave him alone at home with his mother.

He’d enjoyed the party greatly, the only child there; he felt important and all grown up, seated beside his father, listening to all those imposing men talk about things he didn’t understand.

And then Rodolphus came with a date, and by the end of the night, Sirius’ father left with her, but only after instructing a pissed of Rodolphus to take Sirius home.

“Your father is a piece of work,” he’d told Sirius, as he held his hand and Apparated him to Lestrange Manor. *“Steals my date and then makes me babysit you.”*

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said, quickly, because he didn’t want Rodolphus to be upset with him. Rodolphus was nineteen, freshly out of Hogwarts, and the coolest person Sirius knew.

“Let it serve as a lesson- never bring a woman around your father, unless you’re married to her. Fuck, the way he’s going, even a marriage might not stop him.”

“I so wish I would have been there,” Bellatrix says, wistfully, smiling at her husband. “You must have felt so humiliated.” She pats his forearm, mockingly. “Don’t take it personally- no woman could resist my uncle.”

Rodolphus’ jaw ticks with annoyance.

“It’s alright,” he says. “I ended up marrying his beloved niece soon after.” He smiles back at her.

“Doesn’t sound like much of a prize to me,” Sirius says. “Raighne was much better. She was fun and *sane*, too.”

Bellatrix finally looks at him- glares at him, really- and Rodolphus turns his way as well, anger making a vein throb on his forehead.

No one insults his darling wife when he's around.

He opens his mouth, but just then Voldemort walks in.

Perfect timing, Sirius thinks.

The others hurry to kneel.

Instantly, Voldemort's eyes fall on the magazine.

Rodolphus, still kneeling, looks at Voldemort's face carefully, then at the magazine, then at Sirius.

Luckily, Rabastan and Lucius have their heads bowed, and Bellatrix is too lost in adoration with Voldemort and his presence to pay much notice to Rodolphus' antics.

"Rise."

They do, and then they sit, once Voldemort does.

Rodolphus is still studying Voldemort's expressions.

Sirius does, too. He knows Voldemort can't possibly mind- after all, Sirius isn't discrete, and while Voldemort probably doesn't read these magazines, everyone gossips a lot in these circles. Can't be news to him that Sirius is still fucking around.

He doesn't seem bothered, and the slight anxiety Sirius felt goes away.

He conducts the meeting as he always does, though Sirius is finding it harder and harder to concentrate on what he says. He keeps getting distracted by - *everything*, really.

The way his voice sounds, with different inflections. The way his hair looks in that lighting. The way his robes fall around his shoulders.

And then he thinks of those shoulders when there's no robe over them.

"I need one of you to deliver a package to Liverpool later tonight. I would ask Sirius, but it seems you had a busy night." His eyes briefly fall to the magazine again, and then to Sirius. "I imagine you are tired?"

"Drained, really," Sirius says. "*Sucked dry*, you could say."

Lucius groans in embarrassment.

Rabastan laughs.

Rodolphus keeps glaring between Sirius and Voldemort.

“I see. Rodolphus, you go. Sirius should rest.”

Ah, this is brilliant, Sirius thinks, leaning back in his chair. *Didn’t go quite the way you planned it, did it, you stupid fuck?*

Though what was Rodolphus’ plan, really? To test if Voldemort cares? Does he know Sirius and Voldemort are…involved? He always suspected it, long before it happened, but what did he plan with the magazine?

“Rodolphus?” Voldemort enquires, sharply, a handful of seconds later.

“Yes, my lord,” Rodolphus agrees, though he doesn’t look best pleased. “I will go.”

“Good. Spend the night there. Wait for an answer from the man you will meet.”

Lucius is frowning, as delicately as his wife does it, and now he’s looking between Voldemort, Sirius and Rodolphus, too.

The meeting ends, soon after; Voldemort is the first to leave, then Lucius. Rabastan wants to stay behind, question Sirius about Rosmerta, but Rodolphus barks at him to get lost.

Sirius had just made his way down a hallway that will lead him to one of the back entrances, when Rodolphus shoves him against the wall, his fingers curling around Sirius’ throat in the blink of an eye. His face is not even an inch away.

“If you ever insult my wife in my home, I’m going to cut off your tongue,” he growls.

“Rodolphus,” Bella says, from somewhere behind him. Sirius can’t see her. He can’t see anything beside Rodolphus’ face. “Let him go.”

“Did you hear that?” Sirius asks, though Rodolphus’ fingers around his windpipe cause his voice to sound a little breathless. “I think your *bitch* of a wife ordered you to-”

Rodolphus makes such a strange noise, frustration mixed with anger, low and high at the same time, and Sirius laughs.

Or he attempts too; hard to laugh when he can’t breathe-

“Unhand him.”

Sirius wasn’t mad, not truly, not until he heard Voldemort’s voice.

I don’t need you to defend me. I’m not a child.

Rodolphus doesn’t look happy with the interruption either, and for a second he keeps strangling Sirius.

Don’t stop, Sirius urges him.

If only just to piss Voldemort off. To take away this power he has over Rodolphus, over Rodolphus' Manor; the power he has over Lucius and Bellatrix, and the fucking world; the power he has over Sirius.

Rodolphus, disappointedly, lets go of Sirius, steps back, even if he's breathing so hard it's as if he was the one who's throat was caught in a death grip just seconds before.

The hallway is badly illuminated, as is everything in Lestrange Manor.

Ghosts are more suited than people to roam within those halls, with long dead Lestranges hanging on the walls, watching curiously from their frames. Ancient banners and ugly statues stand guard.

"What has gotten into-" Voldemort asks, advancing towards them, but he doesn't get to finish his question, because Sirius punches Rodolphus.

A satisfying crunch interrupts that deep voice, and Sirius feels an aristocratic nose breaking under his knuckles.

It hurts his fingers, too, but Sirius never minded a little pain, not when he could inflict it on others.

'You are surrounded by people. Breathing, vulnerable human beings, Sirius!" Dumbledore said, when Sirius was sixteen and was sat in his office, defiant, half sorry Snape didn't actually die. *"People, not collateral damage to your moods!"*

Dumbledore never understood Sirius himself is collateral damage to his moods.

If he needs to hurt himself to hurt someone else, he'll do it.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Bella exclaims, and then everything happens at once.

Rodolphus is in his space again, blood now on his face to keep company to his anger, but this time Sirius fights back-

It's chaotic, and Sirius loves to have placed Voldemort in a position where he can experience mindless chaos.

Sadly, Voldemort ends it in a second, takes back the control, his magic getting between Sirius and Rodolphus like an invisible barrier, pushing them apart.

Sirius looks at him, and he wants to find Voldemort furious. He wants to provoke feelings no one else provokes in that man.

But Voldemort doesn't look furious. Not even annoyed. Not even disappointed.

He glances between Sirius and Rodolphus, Bella screaming at her husband serving as music in the background.

“I’d have never thought I’d witness muggle savagery within these proud, ancient walls,” Voldemort says, finally, and that shuts Bella up. “*Shameful.* If you two have an issue to resolve, do it as wizards, not animals.”

“Gladly,” Sirius says, taking out his wand.

“My lord,” Bellatrix tries to interrupt. “Maybe this isn’t a-”

Rodolphus takes out his wand, too, spits blood all over the floor.

His eyes are already swelling. Sirius smirks at him.

“Gonna make you cry, Black,” Rodolphus promises.

“Rodolphus,” Bella warns, but once again she doesn’t finish speaking.

“Best we take it to the garden,” Voldemort declares and starts walking. “Bellatrix, no need for you to join us.”

The invisible barrier remains between Sirius and Rodolphus at all times, even as they follow Voldemort out.

Once every few seconds, Rodolphus spits out another mouthful of blood, even if he used his wand to snap his nose back in place.

He glares at Sirius, and Sirius glares back, all in silence.

Mentally, Sirius prepares himself for pain. But he’s not afraid; more like excited.

Rodolphus is a beast in combat; he can even hold his own against Moody, with little trouble. He’s going to give Sirius a good duel.

He’s going to kick your arse, a sensible voice informs him.

But that’s fine. Sirius is used to Voldemort making short work of him every Tuesday; at least now he is convinced he’ll do some damage back.

The most he can.

He rolls his shoulders, knotted with anticipation.

It’s cold outside, but he only realises this intellectually, what with the hail bearing down on them.

He feels hot. And ready.

Voldemort picks a spot, and a circle glows bright around them. He steps outside of it, leaving Sirius and Rodolphus inside.

“If you get out of the circle-”

“Thanks,” Sirius spits at him. “But I don’t need you to explain the rules to me. Do you?” He snaps at Rodolphus.

They don’t do the circle thing Tuesdays, they didn’t do it when Moody was trying to give Sirius, James, Remus, Lily and Peter a crash training, right after they joined the Order.

But the circle is standard in any formal duelling competition. Sirius has seen dozens of those, all over the world, seated beside his father and enjoying the finest wizarding competitions.

“Very well,” Voldemort says, and he does sound a tad ticked off now.

The invisible wall between him and Rodolphus vanishes. Immediately, Sirius moves to cast, but then the shield appears again.

What now?

He turns to glare at Voldemort.

“I thought you know the rules, Sirius. You have to bow, first.”

“Oh, for the love of-“ He breathes in. “Are you going to give me a trophy then, when I win? If you want this to be formal, I want a trophy.”

A smile. “I will give Rodolphus one.”

Alright, then I won’t lose. Fuck you. Fuck both of you.

Sirius was prepared to lose. But now? Impossible. He’ll either win, or his bones will rot within that circle.

He turns his attention to Rodolphus.

“I guess bowing means nothing to you, since you’re used to grovelling at *someone’*s feet. I’ll indulge you.”

The barrier between them vanishes once more.

They both bow, swiftly, a barely there incline of their heads.

And then, it begins.

(-)

“Yield!” Rodolphus snarls at him. “Admit defeat.”

Sirius wheezes. He can’t see much, but Rodolphus’ shape looks bloodied and battered and not doing too great, swaying in front of Sirius.

“Never,” Sirius says, or wants to say. Only blood comes out when he opens his mouth.

Blacks don’t admit defeat. Blacks don’t cry.

There is some liquid obscuring Sirius’ sight, but he is pretty sure it’s blood, not tears.

Rodolphus’ anger drained out of him, along with some blood of his own.

He sounds tired. The power in his curses isn’t what it was when they began.

Either that, or Sirius lost most of the feeling in his body so he doesn’t register the new hits very much. Everything already hurts beyond reason. Impossible to have new pain.

It’s hard to stand, so he doesn’t do much standing, collapsing every other second, feels like. The last Cruciatus must be at fault for that. He can’t stop his legs from trembling.

He’s never experienced the Cruciatus before- well, he did, practicing around with Marlene. But they could never truly muster a desire to make the other suffer so badly, and it was only for a few seconds.

Nothing like Rodolphus’ Cruciatus.

That was a surprise. Sirius knows he screamed, and he knows he’ll be embarrassed about it if he survives, but he did not cry. No. He bit his tongue, and chocked on his blood for a bit.

(-)

He gets up again, though it’s a miracle. He can’t put any weight on one of his arms. It’s broken so horribly - a bone snapping curse- that it looks monstrous.

Yet Sirius manages to push himself up on it, anyway, using the increased white-hot pain as an incentive to stand.

Rodolphus just stares at him. He’s as injured as he was last time Sirius fell.

Been a while since Sirius cursed him; hard to do without a wand.

He can’t remember when he lost his wand.

But it doesn’t matter. One doesn’t lose the duel when he loses his wand, after all. One loses when one gets out of the circle.

And Sirius will not.

Even so, Rodolphus is injured enough. Sirius knows he’ll feel pride- again, if he survives- but it’s hard to feel anything right then, other than blinding pain.

“Sirius,” Rodolphus says. His face is too bloody to give space to any expression, one of his eyes is shut close, but Sirius thinks he see incredulity in the one green eye that is staring at him.

Sirius shrugs- well, he attempts.

“You’re mad.”

Sirius laughs. Or wheezes. In any case, he makes a noise.

You only know realise this?

A new curse sends Sirius right back on the ground. Another bone snaps, this time in his leg.

Another occasion for Voldemort to say something, to stop this.

He doesn’t.

Every time Sirius found himself on the ground, he dreaded the moment Voldemort will stop it, the moment he’ll need to interfere, like Sirius is a child, like Sirius needs his protection.

But Voldemort did not say a word so far.

Maybe he left, Sirius thinks, trying to breathe. But no, no. If he had left, Sirius would have given up, would have admitted defeat long before. Probably after that second Cruciatus.

He can *feel* Voldemort, even if he can’t see him. Sirius just knows he’s there, and it was only the thought that he’s watching this that gives Sirius the strength to attempt to stand back up.

Rodolphus’ boot hits him in the ribs, and Sirius’ body twists, he find himself face first into a patch of wet grass.

Wet with blood.

“Stop this,” Rodolphus demands. “Get out of the circle.”

This really looks horrible, Sirius thinks, staring at his mangled arm. He can see his *bone*.

Sirius gets his good arm between himself and the ground. His good arm is not doing *so good* either, but at least it still looks like an arm.

He pushes himself up. Up to one knee. He needs a moment to breathe.

“You’re an imbecile,” Rodolphus says, and he kicks Sirius in the back, sending him face first to the ground.

But then he leaves.

Sirius sees him limping out of the circle. “Fucking Blacks!” Rodolphus yells, to no one in particular, but he *left.*

“I won!” Sirius declares, weakly.

“A peculiar way of winning,” Voldemort’s voice comes, and Sirius smiles in the dirt.

A victory is a victory, he wants to say, but there are too many words there. Not worth the effort.

He’s turned around on his back. The hail only got worse, pelting Sirius with freezing water.

He’s very cold. From the rain or from blood loss.

Voldemort crunches down next to him.

“Trophy,” Sirius reminds him.

Voldemort laughs.

(-)

When he comes to his senses, he’s in a body of water. The perfect temperature, enveloping his body like an embrace.

A pleasant smell invades his nostrils.

Sirius opens his eyes, slowly, blinking fast to get used to the light.

Not that there is much of it; just a handful of candles.

He’s in Voldemort’s majestic bathtub.

Voldemort is there, too, sat on the edge of it.

“Much better,” Sirius says.

He barely remembers the trip from Lestrange Manor to the cabin. He thinks he fainted right after it.

He woke up in Voldemort’s bed a few times, but that wasn’t so pleasant, and he was sent back to sleep after being made to swallow a potion or another.

“You are healed. Mostly. You will probably not feel the greatest for a number of days, but that is what happens when one is stubborn beyond reason.”

“Brilliant.”

“You did very well.” His sleeves are rolled back, and one of his hands disappears under the water, his fingers resting on Sirius’ abdomen. “It’s been years since anyone could injure

Rodolphus as badly."

"Could have done better."

"Hmm." Voldemort's fingers trail up to Sirius' chest. "I have been training Rodolphus for almost a decade. He is one of my strongest fighters. You will grow stronger."

Pride burns so hot inside Sirius, he's surprised the water doesn't start boiling around him.

"You are still very young, but give it another year or so, and the results of a duel between you will be quite different."

"What do you mean?" Sirius enquires. "I still won, regardless of who's better at the moment. Where's my trophy?"

"I've never known someone so fearless in the face of pain and death," Voldemort says. "Fascinating."

"You've met Bellatrix."

"Even Bella has a grain of regard for her well being. And her temper would never allow her to be so composed during a hopeless duel."

Sirius attempts to shift, but he's dizzy. In a pleasant way. Too pleasant. Probably a consequence of the pain relief potions or the healing magic.

"Why am I in the bathtub?"

"Cleaning spells can only be so helpful," Voldemort answers. "This isn't your first bath. That one turned the water red. It looked like you were floating in blood."

"Should have saved some of it," Sirius drawls. "Mine and Rodolphus' pure blood filling up your bathtub… Very valuable stuff."

"Maybe I did," Voldemort says, just because he has an answer to any insult Sirius tries to throw his way.

"Or maybe you just wanted to have me naked and unconscious, so I can't defend myself," Sirius shoots back.

"You are always defenceless around me," Voldemort says, but he takes his hand back. Sirius misses the feel of his fingers as soon as they are gone. "Even when you are conscious, even when you have your wand, you are still defenceless."

"Don't I know it," Sirius mutters, peeved.

Voldemort moves to stand, but Sirius grabs his hand.

"Stay."

He'll blame it on the potions, later, or on the wooziness. On *anything*, really. He isn't himself, he's still recovering, and that's why he sounds like he's begging, surely.

If he was himself, he wouldn't have said that. He wouldn't insist Voldemort should get in the tub with him.

Yet he does.

Finally, submerged under water, Voldemort's body temperature seems to rise. He doesn't feel as cold as he usually does.

Why does this feel so right? So incredibly good? Sirius should not be so comfortable with Voldemort behind him, especially naked like that.

But he is comfortable. He rests his head and back on Voldemort's chest and it feels nice.

Instead of threatening, Sirius finds Voldemort to be a safe, steady presence that he can lean on.

Loosing my fucking mind.

He never thought going insane would be so pleasant.

He closes his eyes and enjoys it, *all* of it; Voldemort's slow heartbeat, the way his chest moves when he breathes, the way his fingers move on Sirius' arms.

The way his fingers feel on Sirius' chest, and stomach, and then his upper tights. And then on Sirius' hard cock.

Voldemort is hard, too, the length of him pressed against Sirius' lower back.

It's so *intense*. The nerves in his body are all alive, as they would be, after the Cruciatus. But he's also on what he imagines very potent pain potions, so the pain is gone and his nerves are just left hyper-sensitive to other sensations.

Voldemort is either an extremely fast learner or he must touch himself more than Sirius imagined, because his fingers moves without hesitations on Sirius' cock. He squeezes just hard enough, twists his wrist in a perfect way, and when Sirius thrust his hips up, Voldemort understands immediately to go faster.

His other hand is draped over Sirius' chest, holding him close.

Sirius should do something. He should turn around, straddle Voldemort- anything; he should be leading this.

He brushes it off. It feels so *good*, even his mind can't ruin it.

He even enjoys the way Voldemort's cock throbs against his back.

How would it feel? he wonders, cutting off a moan when Voldemorts's thumb rubs over his cockhead. *If I were to let him fuck me, how would it feel?*

Shameful, maybe. Confusing. But how would it feel physically?

Careful, a voice warns.

But it's going to happen, eventually, won't it? Every time they're naked together Voldemort makes it clearer and clearer that he's interested in that.

Maybe I should let him now. I'm high on potions, my mind is numb- it would be more bearable if I'm in this state.

Voldemort's free hand moves, tilts Sirius' head to the side.

And then Sirius feels lips on his neck. And then a tongue.

He moans and he doesn't even try to muffle it now.

A jolt of pain shoots throughout his body, the potions probably wearing off, or his nerves are so stimulated now that the damage from the Cruciatus makes itself known.

It passes as soon as it came, and Sirius is only left more sensitive in its wake.

"Fuck," he breathes out.

He can feel Voldemort's smile on his neck.

Why does he always have to be so full of himself?

Pot, kettle.

He keeps his eyes closed. If he can't see, he can pretend it's a dream.

So he pretends it is a dream, especially when Voldemort's other hand trails down his stomach, over his thigh, and then in between Sirius' slightly spread, bent legs, bracketed by Voldemort's own.

It's just a dream, why not? So Sirius spreads them wider, forcing Voldemort to do the same.

Luckily, the bathtub is the only luxury Voldemort seems to indulge in, so it is big enough to hold them both comfortably.

He can't breathe. It's too hot. The water is hot, the steam makes everything humid, his recently tortured nerves, the hand on his cock, the one on his balls, and that tongue on his neck-

He *can* breathe, he takes a shuddering breath, yet somehow it's as if he's breathing lust instead of air. His lungs aren't happy, but his cock is.

Oh, how it is happy.

Another bout of nerve pain travels through his body, sharp enough that it could have possibly pulled him back from the edge. Why, then, when Voldemort bites into his neck, which is also painful, Sirius registers that pain as pleasure?

He comes, white spots dancing behind his closed eyes. Stars, actually. White stars.

He slumps against Voldemort, who continues to do something to his neck, who continues to stroke Sirius until he makes sure every drop is out.

"I still want a trophy," Sirius forces himself to say, when he can't pretend he's dreaming anymore.

Voldemort lets go of his cock just as Sirius was becoming too sensitive. He kisses the side of Sirius neck. A light, quick *kiss*.

What am I doing here? This will be the death of me one day.

"I shall make you a bronze statuette, then. It will be lying on the ground, full of blood, very clearly losing yet refusing to give up."

"Great. I'll proudly present it to my mum."

Why would you bring your mum up now?

"Of course you'd be one of those people," she says when she finds him with Rosier in that spare bedroom. "You can't do anything right!"

Voldemort is still hard; that doesn't mean much, per se. He's always hard after Sirius has finished. But this time he doesn't seem to want to end it. His fingers grip Sirius, one hand on Sirius' hip, the other on his arm.

Just let him. How bad can it be, really? I can stay still and take it for a few minutes. I'll hate it, and then next time he tries it, I can just tell him I hated it and it won't be happening again.

"Not here," Sirius says. "In bed." He frowns, remembering the directions won't make sense to Voldemort, since Sirius only decided things in his head, not out-loud.

Voldemort takes him to bed, anyway. Before Sirius can blink, not only did they Apparate in bed, but they're dry.

Sirius' mouth is dry, too, all of a sudden. He gulps. They are in the same position they were in the bathtub, but Voldemort quickly extricates himself from behind Sirius, leaving Sirius to rest his back half on a pillow, half on the headboard.

Voldemort gets out of bed, and a robe covers him soon. He reaches for a glass of water and hands it to Sirius, along with a vial of a purple potion.

"How often does Dumbledore require to hear from you?" he asks.

Oh, good. Surely no more sex is coming if he brought Dumbledore up.

“Someone should see me at least every two days,” Sirius says.

It’s usually James or Peter. Well, there are the magazines with him snogging women, too; in any case, Dumbledore requires to have proof of life every two days.

“You’ve been unconscious for almost sixty hours,” Voldemort informs him. “Two Patronuses tried to sneak past the wards earlier today. They didn’t succeed.”

Sirius gets out of bed, carefully. He’s still dizzy. Coming didn’t help. Just made him sleepy.

The desire to curl up in Voldemort’s oddly comfortable bed is overwhelming. He wants to stay there, he doesn’t want to-

It doesn’t matter, does it?

As soon as he’s on his feet, one of those pesky jolts of pain shows up again.

And his hands are trembling, slightly.

“I assume your friends were trying to reach you. A stag and a rat. A rat, Sirius? You’re friends with a *rat*?”

“Rats are extremely intelligent creatures,” Sirius snaps, as he accepts the robe that is handed to him.

One of Voldemort’s robes.

Sirius wonders if he liked the robe he got for him. If he wore it, tried it on. He wonders what Voldemort thinks of Sirius buying him gifts.

Why did I do that? Why do I want to get him gifts? He’s the bloody dark lord!

He ignores the thoughts and goes back to Peter.

Sirius didn’t like it when James made fun of Peter when it proved his animagus form was a measly rat, nothing impressive. He told James the same thing he told Voldemort. Rats are intelligent beings.

“They are.” Voldemort says. And then, after a brief pause: “They are also known for *other things*.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Must be hard to be paranoid and see betrayals everywhere.”

“It isn’t hard at all. It is natural and also prudent.”

“Yeah, yeah-fuck!” Sirius winces when he puts one arm through the sleeve and the pain comes again.

“Come back tomorrow, I need to brew you more nerve healing potions.”

It will go away without the potions, too. But it will take more time for the damage to subside.

He'd heard of people going crazy from the Cruciatus, but he never truly believed it until he felt the bloody thing.

Of course, the two he received are nowhere near enough to shatter his mind, but he can definitely see now how the Unforgivable could lead to such an outcome with prolonged exposure.

"Don't do anything strenuous with your right hand, either. Your bone finished growing last night, but you need a strengthening elixir-"

"No wanking, got it. Luckily, you took care of that for me."

Shut up!

Voldemort sighs. Sirius can't really blame him.

The robe fits him well. They're nearly just as tall, and Voldemort wears robes too big for him, to hide how slim he actually is.

It's a tight fit, but it's fine.

"I'm not sure if it is wise to Apparate on your own. I can take you home and then you can call one of your friends-"

"I'm fine." Sirius waves it away.

"That's what you said when I brought you here after the duel. And you were most definitely not fine."

Don't mother me, Sirius almost says. Luckily, he doesn't, but he wishes he had, because next Voldemort says: "Make sure you eat something."

"Alright, that's enough. I'll come back tomorrow."

Walking turns to be a bit weird. Not just because he's lightheaded, but his legs must have been broken, too, because they feel weird, like they do after they have been mended after a fracture.

"Oh." He stops in the doorway. "Is Rodolphus alright?"

"He is. Bella wrote to inform me he wasn't able to make the trip to Ireland that night, however."

"Good." At least that. At least he took Rodolphus out of commission for a night. "We're fine," Sirius says, just to make sure. "Rodolphus and I. We're fine. I hope you understand that."

“Not really,” Voldemort admits. “I don’t understand how you can be fine with someone after that, but I have seen it happen before between friends. Or brothers. Rodolphus almost killed Rabastan in the spring and apparently they are *fine*, too.”

“Alright.”

He doesn’t need Voldemort hurting Rodolphus or anything crazy like that. Not that he would- why would he?

If he was upset Rodolphus fucked Sirius up, he wouldn’t have let him.

Voldemort isn’t *protective*.

He did kill Mulciber for cursing you that day in Diagon Alley, though, didn’t he? That felt protective.

Sirius shakes his head. A mistake, because it brings more pain, but at least it makes him stop thinking stupid, *stupid* thoughts.

(-)

Apparition is *brutal*. Voldemort taking them from one room to another was nothing.

But this-

Sirius falls down, crippled by pain for long minutes. He waits on the ground until it passes.

“Fuck this shit,” he says, and transforms into Padfoot, but he makes sure to spell his robe in place before he does.

He will take the tunnel. No way he’s walking all the way to Hogwarts.

Usually, Sirius sees James or Peter at least every two days, and James can report to Dumbledore that Sirius is alive and well, not captured by Death Eaters and kept in a dungeon somewhere.

Sirius avoids Dumbledore as much as possible. But he doesn’t want James to see him like this.

The Cruciatus tremors are quite hard to hide, and quite infamous, too.

Marlene would say that was the first clue someone was under the curse. Even if the patient came in unconscious, their hands or feet would be wrecked by tremors.

Sirius isn’t *wrecked*, whatever potions he was given helped, but it is definitely there.

Pain, as anything else, is less when he's Padfoot. The shocks still come and go, but it's easier to bear.

He trots all the way to Hogwarts through the secret passages.

Once inside, he turns back into a man.

He can hear hundred of excited voices coming from the Great Hall. Should be dinner time.

Indeed, it was, because Sirius sits on the floor in front of Dumbledore's office and waits quite a while before the man shows up.

"Sirius!"

"Hi." He stands, suppressing a winch. "I'm alive, all is well. Sorry for the delay. Bye now."

"Wait." Dumbledore is already in his face, with his all knowing gaze.

"I'd rather go home and rest to be honest."

"Sirius."

Knowing he won't get out of it, he follows Dumbledore into his office.

Immediately, several instruments on the desk start whistling or vibrating.

Great, now I will get a headache, too. As soon as he thinks it, the high pitch whistling provokes a throbbing in his temples.

"Can you shut them up?"

Dumbledore waves his wand, and then blessedly there is silence.

"They react to dark magic-"

"I know!" Sirius snaps. He collapses into a chair. "I've had a long day-days-whatever. I'm fine, I'm alive, I wanna go home."

"You were tortured."

Dumbledore is bent over him, concern all over his face.

"When you make statements like that, what's the point in waiting for an answer, huh?"

"How did you anger him?"

"I didn't. He didn't torture me, for Merlin's sake!"

Sirius still hadn't seen Voldemort torture anyone. He knows, deep down, that he does it. He *must*, what with the rumours and the fear some of his Death Eaters display around him. But

Sirius didn't see it, so he prefers to operate under the assumption that Voldemort isn't torturing his own men.

"Your hands are trembling; you were placed under the Cruciatus. But you were also healed. Who else would-?"

"A family argument," Sirius says. He pauses for a second, weighting his hate for Bellatrix with the love he still has- *always* will have- for her. The love wins. He might never speak to her again, but he doesn't want her in Azkaban. "With Rodolphus. I told you he's hurting my cousin. So I demanded answers, I wanted to know what he's doing to her. He lost his temper, I lost mine, we got into a duel and here we are."

Dumbledore still doesn't believe him. "And who healed you?"

"Voldemort. He was…around. It was after a meeting, so he was there-"

"He healed you out of the goodness of his heart? And what happened to your neck?

Oh, shit. Embarrassment burrows deep into his stomach. Sirius does not like feeling shame. So he snaps.

"It's a love bite. I'm fucking Voldemort, you see. He healed me because he likes my pretty face and doesn't want it ruined."

"Sirius, this isn't a joke."

"I'm not joking," he insists, though he knows Dumbledore won't believe him. Which is *why* he said it. And, one day, if Dumbledore by some miracle actually find out Sirius is fucking Voldemort, then Sirius will say 'I did tell you about it'.

"Come, let me take you to Poppy."

"I'm fine! The shakes will go away."

Dumbledore puts a hand on his shoulder, and Sirius looks up at him. "You're not leaving Hogwarts until Poppy sees you."

The concern in his eyes is so genuine, Sirius finds it hard to dismiss it. *He does care about me.*

It's easy to resent Dumbledore when he's not around; easy to judge him.

But when he looks at Sirius with grandfatherly concern…more than grandfatherly; after all, Sirius' grandparents never looked so worried over Sirius' well being.

"And how will you explain the dark magic to Poppy?"

"She is a very discreet woman. I trust her."

“You trust no one,” Sirius spits at him, unable to bare the kindness in those old, piercing eyes.

(-)

“Goodness,” Poppy mutters, after all her diagnostic spells come back. She looks pale. “Well.” She coughs. “You seem to have received the proper potions and healing- nothing is wrong, just lingering side effects.”

“Told you,” Sirius brags to Dumbledore, who’s standing beside the bed.

“I want him to spend the night,” Poppy tells Dumbledore. “He needs rest, and I will ask Horace to brew something for his nerves so they stop misfiring.” She glances at Sirius with pity. “That can’t feel nice, I imagine.”

“It’s fine. I’m not spending the night.”

They both ignore him. Sirius feels like he’s twelve years old again, making a scene that he doesn’t want to stay in the Hospital Wing. Only usually it was McGonagall there to make sure that he does.

“Go speak to Horace,” Dumbledore says. “Thank you, Poppy.”

She nods. “I’m sending him soup. He needs to eat something. Make sure he does, Albus.”

“I will.”

“Will you spoon feed me?” Sirius mocks, Poppy’s footsteps retreating in the distance.

Dumbledore transfigures a bedside chair into a majestic armchair. The tapestry is the same garish yellow as Dumbledore’s robes.

Silence stretches over them, a heavy, suffocating thing. Sirius never feels at ease around the Headmaster. It’s as if he’s a child that did something wrong, waiting for judgment.

He’s glad when an elf comes with a bowl of soup, and Sirius falls upon it, eager to do something to occupy his mind.

The first spoonful of hot soup provokes an excruciating pain in all of his teeth; from there, the pain travels down his spine.

He almost drops the damn thing, but recovers just in time, and only a bit of liquid sloshes over the edges.

“What was the meeting about?”

Sirius shrugs. “He wants a package sent to Ireland. I don’t know what or why or to whom. Rodolphus was supposed to take it but I derailed those plans.”

More silence.

Sirius finishes his soup in peace, without further pain. He gets a few muscle spasms here and there, but nothing he can’t handle.

“Some in the Ministry want my opinion,” Dumbledore starts.

“When don’t they,” Sirius mutters.

“On whether they should go ahead and arrest Rodolphus.”

“On what charges?”

“There is enough circumstantial evidence at this point to warrant an arrest. Apparently, just last month he assaulted a muggleborn in public, in full view of witness. Two months ago he cursed a shop owner in Diagon Alley.”

“That’s nothing. They can’t hold him for that.”

“It is enough to arrest him, and once they arrest him they will check for a Mark-”

“They haven’t made *tattoos* illegal yet.”

“No, but *that* tattoo does permit the use of Veritaserum and the involvement of a Legilimens.”

Well, that would do nothing. Voldemort trains them on how to resist both of those.

“Some do not want Rodolphus Lestrange arrested- whether because they, too, support Voldemort, whether because they are related to Rodolphus-”

He means Lucius. Sirius isn’t sure if anyone *truly* suspects Lucius of being a Death Eater; even Dumbledore might not. The peacock really does an outstanding job at behaving like a blood purist, but a *reasonable* one that would never condone such violence.

“Some are simply terrified of him; it doesn’t matter. They do not want him arrested. Others do, but they worry about consequences. The problem is, the one that I was consulted on… how will Voldemort react if Rodolphus is sentenced to Azkaban?”

“You’re asking me?” Sirius clarifies.

“Yes.”

“Badly, obviously.”

Dumbledore nods. “I know Voldemort has power over the Dementors. I know he has the power to take Azkaban even without having the Dementors on his side.”

Does he? Bella seemed to thinks so, too.

Sirius is sure of it, but he fears he's so in awe of Voldemort lately that his opinion on the man is no longer based in reality. These days, Sirius would agree if someone were to say Voldemort could Apparate on the moon.

"But it would still be a complicated objective to achieve and it will come at great cost. For his side, and for our side."

Sirius can only imagine.

"Would he take Azkaban if Rodolphus is sent there? Is Rodolphus that important?"

"Yes," Sirius says, simply. "Rodolphus is in charge of at least half his army, from what I understand."

To say nothing of the personal relationship between them; but he won't waste his breath. Dumbledore would never understand Voldemort can actually be fond of some of his men.

"If Voldemort takes Azkaban, it would be such a show of force that all the resistance against him will shatter. People will be too afraid to fight him. "

The resistance shattered already. With every passing year, wizards and witches that aren't in the Order or the Ministry are starting to be especially careful to show neutrality. Some even stopped talking with old muggleborn friends, just so they won't be branded blood traitors. Recruiting for the Order is going badly; it's only naive students straight out of Hogwarts that Dumbledore can convince to join.

The Auror program has less and less people interested in it. The prestigious job has lost its appeal, what with the numbers of dead Aurors piling on.

And in the past two years the Hit Wizards failed to convince a single new person to join their ranks, even if they lowered the admission standards and raised the pay to a ridiculous degree. It seems greed is not enough to risk battle with Death Eaters. People would rather starve than become Hit Wizards.

"It is a known fact that Rodolphus is pivotal to Voldemort's cause. If he falls, many will follow. Yet it seems arresting him could cause us more damage."

"Quite the pickle," Sirius says.

This war is truly lost. There is nothing they can do. Voldemort is unstoppable.

You need to decide what you want to do, and you need to decide fast. Sirius knows, yet he can't make a decision. It's just too hard.

"Rodolphus needs to die." Dumbledore's voice is firm, no inflections to it. It pierces the silence in the Hospital Wing.

Merlin's pants!

It's the first time in…ever that Sirius hears Dumbledore saying someone *needs* to die.

And then, as the silence persists, it dawns on Sirius.

"You mean…you..are you asking *me* to do it?"

Dumbledore doesn't break eye contact. His grandfatherly disposition is nowhere in sight. A hard, grave man sits in that yellow chair, with his yellow robes, yet somehow there is nothing ridiculous about him.

The hairs on the back of Sirius' neck stand out. It causes Sirius to shiver, and that, in turn, excites his nerves and Sirius' body seizes up with pain.

Pain that is caused by *Rodolphus*, to be sure.

"You are the only one in a position to do it. You are close to him. You are family. You have access to-"

"He kicked my arse in a duel. Sure, I got some hits in, but I can't take him."

"Not in a duel. You have access to him," Dumbledore repeats. "To his drinks and his food. You are welcomed in his house."

Sirius stares at Dumbledore, dumbfounded. Thoughts form and dissolve at the speed of light, leaving him speechless.

When he can think, he realises that yes, from the Ministry and Dumbledore's point of view, this would be the only solution.

Voldemort is winning. People flock to him, because they can see he is winning. He's already won, really, only they're still playing it out.

Losing Rodolphus would be a blow. Not a decisive one, but it would buy the Aurors some time. It would buy Dumbledore time.

Sirius knows he would never do it.

He would never poison anyone, such a cowardly thing to do, but especially not Rodolphus.

"After that is done, you will step back. I know the cost you pay for being there; I know how hard it is to be around Voldemort. It would be for anyone, but especially for you. Besides, after killing Rodolphus, it would be quite obvious who did it. You will come to me and I will protect you. I will hide you. You have my word."

"I- what about my cousin? My family. What about them? Who will Voldemort punish when I am not there to take his ire?"

"Your cousin can come with you. I will offer her my protection, too. Voldemort would never hurt your family. Arcturus Black is highly respected by anyone that supports Voldemort. He decided to be neutral in this conflict. Executing a non-combatant Black or anyone in his

family will cost Voldemort any follower he has in the Sacred Twenty Eight. The Blacks, with their ancient name, should be safe."

They stare at each other.

"Is that what you think of me?" Sirius asks, quietly. "That I could poison someone? Go into their home, smile at them and slip death into their tea?"

"I think you are able to do things most men wouldn't have the stomach to do. I think you have it in you to commit terrible deeds in order to protect the ones you love. You are unlike most members in the Order, Sirius. You always were. They only accept to defend themselves. You, on the other hand, understand that sometimes there is no moving forward without striking first, and striking fast."

All true. All very true.

Why does it hurt to hear it, then?

"You've killed before. You killed when you didn't have to. When I asked all of you not to use lethal force in squeamish with Death Eaters, you ignored that advice. I know who you are, Sirius. You know it, too. You have it in you to be a good man, but you have it in you to do whatever it takes to keep those you love safe."

"You're wrong," Sirius says, still talking very quietly. "I am a killer, yes. I can kill. But I'm not a traitor; I'm not a coward. I won't resort to poison."

Dumbledore doesn't look away, his face as blank as Voldemort's can get.

"I know you are not a traitor, Sirius. I can see how hard it is for you to share with me whatever information you gain in confidence with the Death Eaters. And I am certain it is hard for you to share with them whatever you might learn from me. You do not like to betray those that trust you, even if that is what a spy does."

"And yet you sent me to spy. Or did you simply want an assassin there? One that you knew is related to a high profile target? Is this what you planed, all along?"

Dumbledore really is great at scheming. *He knew I would be a shit spy. Just as Voldemort knows I am a shit spy.*

It's clear now, what Dumbledore truly wanted from Sirius.

And what does Voldemort want? Since he, too, clearly doesn't trust Sirius to spy on Dumbledore for him.

"If you do this, you are free. You will not have to lie anymore. To anyone. There will be no more pretending."

Sirius opens his mouth, but Poppy walks back inside, and Dumbledore stands.

"Rest well," he tells Sirius.

(-)

Rodolphus glares at Sirius. “What do you want, you suicidal cretin?”

Sirius gets straight to the point. “They’re trying to kill you.”

“Who?”

“The Ministry, Dumbledore; that sort.”

Rodolphus snorts. “Shocking.” He takes a sip of his whiskey. “What other revelations will you come up with? Grass is green? The sun rises in the East?”

“They’re *actively* trying to kill you, by whatever means. Poison, treachery, anything.”

Rodolphus sighs. “Again, shocking.”

“You have to take care. You have to take care at any function you go; nowhere is safe- you especially have to take care Bella won’t be drinking or eating anything meant for you.”

Rodolphus doesn’t look concerned.

“You don’t understand how bad this is. Dumbledore- *Dumbledore*- asked me to poison you.”

Rodolphus doesn’t seem to get it. He stares at Sirius as if waiting for something else.

As if Dumbledore arranging someone’s death isn’t *shocking.*

“Wait,” Rodolphus says, finally a frown on his face. “He only asked that *now*?”

“What?”

“I assumed he wanted you to kill me since he sent you to spy. I mean…what other reasons could he have had? You’re a shit spy, Sirius. Discretion and keeping a low profile- a spy’s best qualities- are not your forte.”

“I’ll have you know I am great at discovering shit,” Sirius snarls, to cover the uncomfortable feeling in his chest.

“I do not doubt it. You’re smart. I’m sure you uncovered things. It’s sharing those things that gives you trouble.” Rodolphus laughs. “I’ve known you since you were born, you idiot. If there’s something you know how to do is to keep a secret.”

“So, you thought my mission was to kill you all this time?”

“Well not The Mission, but I figured it was high on the list. They are frothing at the mouth to have me dead. How else would they deal with me? They can’t arrest me- that would go down

poorly, even Crouch understands it."

"And you welcomed me into your home, thinking I will try to kill you?"

Rodolphus laughs. "You're funny. I'm not worried you'd poison me, or stick a knife in my back when I'm not paying attention. That's not you."

"Yet you don't trust me, regardless."

"No. Because I know you won't kill or work towards killing Potter and whatever loser friends you have on that side, either. I fear you'll abandon us, that you'll break Bella's heart after getting her hopes up. I fear the pain you can cause here without trying to cause pain, just out of spite or because you are in a mood one day. " He laughs again. "Worried about you trying to kill me," he mocks. "That's a good one." Rodolphus sighs. "Want some whiskey? You look quite shaken." He smirks, nodding at the tremors Sirius still has in his hands.

"Fuck off. I won!"

"Out of *spite*. Because you forced my hand to be the bigger man and retreat. That's exactly the behaviour that worries me. That you'd sit there and take it and hurt yourself just to prove a fucking point, no matter the consequences. You're immature and far too prideful, which makes you a liability to our cause."

"Give me that whiskey," Sirius demands, and Rodolphus floats the bottle his way. Sirius takes a generous gulp. "I want to train with you."

A raised eyebrow. "You train with our lord. He can teach you far more than I could. He's the one that taught me-"

"I have no chance against him. I'd like to train with you, an actual human, one that makes mistakes and provides me with a fucking chance."

"He's not human?"

Sirius snorts, takes another sip.

Rodolphus searches Sirius' face. "What is going on between you?"

"We're fucking," Sirius says, and, unlike Dumbledore, Rodolphus believes him.

Unlike Dumbledore, Rodolphus knows Sirius would never poison someone; especially not someone in his family, that he'd had known since he was old enough to crawl.

Rodolphus groans, rubbing at his temples. "Fucking Blacks," he mutters.

"It's casual, nothing to worry about. As you saw, he wasn't bothered by your pathetic attempt to gauge his reaction with that silly magazine."

"Casual?" Rodolphus demands. "*Casual?* The dark lord? In what world does he appear to be causal about anything?"

Sirius doesn't answer, because he has no answer. Not one that would benefit his argument, at least.

"*Casual,*" Rodolphus repeats, looking more and more pained and far more concerned about this than the fact that Dumbledore is trying to have him poisoned. "You'll get yourself killed, Sirius. You'll fuck up, he'll kill you, and then Bella will lose her shit."

"You don't seem disturbed," Sirius says, trying for nonchalance.

"*What?* I am very disturbed."

"No- I mean, yes. I mean-" he bites his lip. "I'm a man. And so is he."

Rodolphus rolls his eyes.

"That's the least disturbing thing about it."

Curious, isn't it? How this simple remark, how Rodolphus' dismissive attitude toward a man sleeping with a man calms something in Sirius' mind.

It was a bright day, sun shining over a thin layer of snow outside the windows of the Manor, yet now the day seems even brighter.

The gloomy office looks almost cheery.

Even the skulls on the walls seem to be smiling.

"So?" Sirius asks, relaxing in the armchair. "Will you train with me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Rodolphus scratches his beard. "There's no way you'll survive much longer, not with your attitude and your choice in…bed partners. Easier to recover from your eventual death if I don't spend too much time around you."

"Aren't you a fucking ray of sunshine?"

Rodolphus shrugs. "I'm pragmatic. Oh, one more thing," he adds, when Sirius stands to leave. "I meant it. Insult Bella in my presence again, and I will rip off your tongue. Mind you, you'd be better off if I ripped your cock out- that might actually save your life."

Sirius throws the whiskey bottle at him, but Rodolphus is excellent at ducking.

(-)

“You seem tired,” Voldemort comments, when they sit down to eat.

Apparently they’re Italian for the evening, because there’s some sort of pasta dish in front of Sirius.

“Lily was sick; we had to take her to St Mungo and waited there for quite a while.”

They let her go after a few hours, once her stomach settled.

They went home, and James was as exhausted as his wife. They fell asleep, but Sirius stayed around, awake, in case Lily felt sick again.

She didn’t, thank the gods.

“When is she due?” Voldemort asks, which strikes Sirius as a bit odd.

Unlike Voldemort to care about such things. He mostly zones out when Sirius mentions Narcissa or Lily and their impending children.

“Should be in summer, no? Lucius says his son will come in early June and I remember the Potters should follow suit.”

“Ah, so you were listening to my ramblings.”

“I listen to everything,” Voldemort says, staring at his food as if it did him some personal harm.

His moods are generally stable- or at least far more stable than Sirius’- but once in a while he gets lost in his head and Sirius learned to leave it be.

He prattles on about Evy Macnair and her new fiancé, until Voldemort stops glaring at his food and starts eating it.

When they finish eating, they retreat to the living room where Sirius plays ‘Hotel California’ on his guitar. If Voldemort doesn’t like it, Sirius will have to kill him.

Luckily for him, he seems to enjoy it, especially the part about ‘you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave’.

He doesn’t like ‘Dust in the Wind’ as much, but Sirius is not surprised. Voldemort is exactly the type of man that would take issue with the idea of life being meaningless and all dreams and goals turning into nothing, eventually.

“*All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see,*” Sirius signs, even after he finished the song, just to annoy Voldemort. Who glares at Sirius.

Smirking, Sirius looks back to his guitar. He contemplates if Voldemort is ready for Sex Pistols. Probably not, though Sirius bets he’d like the idea of ‘Anarchy in the UK’.

Lost in thought, trying to think of a song Voldemort would enjoy, he startles when Voldemort speaks.

“So? When is Potter due?”

Sirius looks up once more, gives Voldemort a curious look.

“What’s with the interest in babies?”

A shrug. “I imagine you’ll be busy, what with being its godfather. I won’t be able to count on Lucius in the summer, clearly, and I want to know when to expect to have you distracted.”

“Oh, how considerate of you,” Sirius mocks. “The healer said mid to late July.”

Voldemort nods. He turns his gaze to the window. “Sing the one about the wayward son again.”

Sirius snorts. “Never thought you’d like that one.”

“You like it,” Voldemort answers, though he’s in a mood again, a troubled look in his eyes. “I’ll need your elf soon. If you are still willing to part with it.”

“Gladly,” Sirius assures him, and then turns his focus on his guitar.

Chapter End Notes

I know nothing much happens in this chapter, and I know it is LONG, but I thought it important to establish Sirius' deepening feelings for our beloved dark lord.

Sorry for the long wait. This chapter was difficult. But, from now on, now that I finished most of my other WIPs, the chapters should come more frequently, and I promise they won't be as ridiculously long.

If you managed to read it all, and if you are still here after the long wait, thank you! Please share your thoughts in the comment section.

Also, yes. The prophecy is here.

❤️

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a trigger warning for this chapter. I put it in the end author notes, so those that don't wish to get spoilers won't have to see it.

The vampires are on one side of the table, the werewolves on the other.

In the middle, there's Voldemort, flanked by Sirius and Rodolphus.

The war between werewolves and vampires is an ancient one, going back even before the pureblood-muggleborn dispute.

Impossible to get them to work together.

Greyback is already growling, low in his throat, eyes glowing amber, veins bulging dangerously along his neck.

The vampire's fangs have dropped, eyes turning even redder than Voldemort's.

Rodolphus looks insulted to sit at a table with the 'creatures'.

Voldemort talks of common enemies, of unity in the face of adversity, calmly ignoring the mounting aggression.

Sirius is fascinated. The tension in the room is palpable, growing worse with every second; he knows, instinctively, that he should grab his wand for when inevitably things will go south, yet another part of him dismisses it. *You don't need a wand with Voldemort beside you*, it says.

Eventually, one of the vampires calls Greyback a 'puppy', and all chaos breaks loose.

Sirius barely has time to blink before Greyback is already mostly wolf, lunging over the table.

The vampire slaps him with inhuman speed, and Greyback goes flying to the side, but he's quick to recover, redirecting his limbs in the air somehow, teeth snapping inches away from another's vampire's face.

One of the youngest vampires had gotten to another werewolf, holding him by the hair, fangs piercing the bent neck.

A bang, a blinding light, and everyone stops, pinned in place by magic.

Voldemort stands in the deafening silence, wand in hand.

"Enough," he says.

Sirius isn't sure if he should stand, as well, but Rodolphus remains seated, glaring at everyone that isn't Voldemort, and Sirius decides to imitate him.

"Your claws, your fangs, your superior strength- it will never be a match for magic," Voldemort says.

The beasts all try to fight through the enchantment, but they cannot.

"While you are busy attacking each other, wizards will wipe you out. I am offering you a chance to survive, to live without fear of being hunted. But if you insist on acting like children-"

The youngest vampire in the room is *three times* older than Voldemort. The oldest is four centuries old.

"-like the mindless brutes they make you out to be, then I cannot help you. Do as you please." He ends the enchantment. "Kill each other, or sit. If you sit, however, know this kind of behaviour will not be tolerated in my presence."

While wizardkind had always pushed non-humans to the fringes, werewolves and vampires are notoriously hard to subdue. If it were easy, they'd have long been killed off.

To efficiently bewitch a room filled with werewolves and vampires is a feat only Voldemort can manage.

They stare at him with awe, fear and resentment.

But he made his point. Slowly, glaring at each other, they sit back in their chairs. Voldemort waves his wand again, sealing the bleeding, ripped-apart flesh of one of the werewolf's neck.

Greyback turns back into a man- or whatever goes for man, with him, because he looks just as animalistic even when he's in a completely human form.

Voldemort tells them they can leave their ancient feud behind, that they are no longer in medieval times; they don't have to fight for prey any longer.

"There is enough to go around. And when I take control, there are a few billion muggles to keep you all well-fed."

Eventually, they agree on a truce. Greyback promises they won't set vampire nests on fire during the day anymore, and the vampires reluctantly concede to stop hunting in the forests the pack has claimed as their own.

Greyback and his enforcers leave first.

"Silly dogs," one vampire mutters, watching after them, but at least he waits to say it once the door is closed.

"Oi!" Sirius snaps at him. "Leave dogs out of this!"

"Shut up," Rodolphus snarls at him.

But the vampires don't seem to mind. They all look at Sirius a little too intensely.

They've been looking at him for a while, sneaking glances all night long.

Now that their ancient foes have departed, there is nothing sneaky about it. All those red eyes are fixed on him.

"Umm, "Sirius says, confused, shifting on the bench, closer to Voldemort.

Yet they won't stop *staring*.

Voldemort places a hand on Sirius' shoulder. Sirius should shrug it off, he doesn't need protection, he's not scared or anything-

Then why did you move closer to him?

"Nathaniel," Voldemort says, and finally, the head vampire turns his gaze away, and the rest follow his lead.

"We accepted peace with the animals," Nathanial says. "Now, to our deal."

Apparently, Voldemort is to provide Nathaniel with fifteen people each month, and, in exchange, Nathaniel and the vampires that listen to him will agree to assist Death Eaters here and there.

It's hard for vampires to hunt these days. Muggle technologies, their cameras, mean they can't simply snatch people off the streets as easily as they once did.

Not even the muggle's cattle.

Wizards make for harder prey, knowing tricks to ward their homes against dark creatures.

There are some vampires, like the famous Sanguini, that caved and joined the Ministry in exchange for regular animal meals. But he's been prohibited from touching human blood, and it's quite noticeable.

Sanguni looks like shit whenever he's paraded around at events as the Ministry tame vampire. He looks emaciated, sad and withdrawn, skin a sickly yellow.

Nothing like the vampires in the room. If it weren't for the eyes, they could easily pass for healthy humans. Well, humans that aren't up to date with the latest fashion. They all dress like portraits Sirius had seen of wizards or muggles from long, long before.

Voldemort assures them he can deliver fifteen humans with no issues.

"Rodolphus will bring them to you every first of the month," he says.

"Healthy humans," Nathaniel insists. "Preferably young ones. But not children- there's not much to drink from a child."

Sirius tries not to think too much about it, even if his stomach does a little flip. It sounds horrible, but as long as he won't ever see a bunch of people being rounded up by Death Eaters and handed over to be drained of their blood- well, he can ignore it, can't he?

Besides, he knows it's harder and harder to kidnap muggles these days. Unlike ancient vampires that have no hope of even slightly keeping up with the centuries that pass them by, human wizards have the means to avoid muggle technology, but it isn't easy by any means. Rodolphus will prefer to pick out muggles that other muggles won't miss too much.

It's not like families will be ripped apart monthly. Right?

Why are you so sure they will be all muggle? Isn't this a perfect way for Voldemort to get rid of some witches or wizards that oppose him, as well?

He swallows.

"We have a deal, then," the vampires say. "Now we must seal it."

And they're right back to staring at Sirius, making him forget about the fifteen poor souls, because he feels he should be concerned about himself right then.

He does not like it at all. "What?" he barks at them.

"Excuse us for a moment." Voldemort hauls Sirius by the shoulder and drags him outside Rodolphus' hunting cabin.

"What?" Sirius asks again.

"Vampires insist on sealing their pacts with blood."

"I heard," Sirius says.

Voldemort raises an eyebrow as if to say, 'so why are you confused?'.

It clicks.

"No. *Hells, no!* My blood? No!"

"I asked you, and you said yes."

"No, no! See- that's not how that went. You asked if I want to come along-"

"No, I asked if-"

"I'm not a snack!" Sirius hisses at him.

He doesn't care how Voldemort phrased the stupid question or anything else. He can't remember the discussion well, because he'd been busy lusting over Voldemort at a Death Eater meeting, so he isn't sure what he agreed to when he was asked. But it doesn't matter. He is not letting a vampire bite him.

"You do it! You made the deal with them, not me!"

"They asked for someone young," Voldemort says. "And… pretty."

"Have Rodolphus do it! He's young! He's not horrible to look at!"

"I assume you're not interested in assisting me in this matter?" Voldemort asks and turns his eyes to Rodolphus.

Sirius pulls himself out of a fantasy which involves Voldemort bent over the very same table they are seated at.

"I'd prefer not to," Rodolphus says.

Sirius wonders what the hell they are talking about, what could be so horrible Rodolphus won't do.

"I'll do it," Bella volunteers, a bit hesitant but always determined to please Voldemort.

"No," Rodolphus hisses. "No. You are not."

"How DARE you?" she hisses right back, outraged. "You don't get to-"

Voldemort holds up a hand, and she shuts up. "Maybe Sirius would like to volunteer?"

And then he turns his eyes on Sirius, and a small, secret smile twists his lips, and Sirius struggles to remember what they were talking about- something with vampires. Whatever, he's not against doing something dangerous.

"Sure, I'll do it," he says, mostly to annoy Bella, who apparently wanted to do it.

Oh, the bloody bastards! Of course Rodolphus said no!

It all makes sense now. Why Rodolphus didn't let Bella do it, either.

"You know how close-minded Rodolphus is about non-humans."

"Get Lucius, then! He's young. And he's pretty. As handsome as I am. More, really-"

"I disagree," Voldemort says, eyes going over Sirius' face and- no! No, this is so not the moment to flirt.

"I assure you, he's handsome. Have him do it."

"I thought you are adventurous," Voldemort teases, the jerk! "Don't be afraid. It's just a small, symbolic nip. They can make it not painful- in fact, rumour is it can be quite enjoyable."

"I'm not afraid!"

In the cabin, the vampires have gathered at the window, all glaring hungrily at Sirius through the glass, shoving each other out of the way to better gawk at him.

Salivating, really.

"Gods, how easier my life would have been if I were hideous," Sirius complains.

Voldemort sighs, disappointed. "Fine. I'll summon someone else. Severus, I think-"

"You're joking," Sirius says, outraged. "Snape? I thought you said they wanted someone pretty. They'll run away in horror if they see Snape."

"He's young," Voldemort says, dismissive. "And at least he's brave; they'll appreciate that-"

Sirius shoves Voldemort aside and marches to the cabin. The utter bastard.

He knows he's being manipulated, goaded into it. Voldemort must have guessed Sirius would throw himself into a volcano at the mere implication fucking Snape would be braver than him.

By the time he enters, Voldemort is right behind him, and the vampires abandon their spying position at the window.

"Alright," Sirius declares. "Which one of you bloodsuckers -"

Nathanial steps forward, all a smile. Usually, vampires are really sensitive to insults, but it seems he didn't mind Sirius' tone.

"No," Sirius says, holding out a hand. "That one."

He points to a woman. Her fangs pop out the moment he looks at her.

"I am the leader," Nathanial argues.

"Forget it," Sirius sneers. "I'm not exchanging bodily fluids with a *man*."

Let Voldemort choke on that.

Rodolphus perks up at this, from where he was sitting gloomily at the table.

"But I am the leader," Nathaniel keeps saying. The woman is already advancing closer. "The pact is between me and-"

"And the dark lord. Since he has kindly offered an *underling* to seal it for him," Sirius spits. "I don't see why you can't."

"Absolutely no reason," the woman says, ignoring Nathaniel's protests. "As long as blood is exchanged from both sides, the pact is sacred." She says something in another language to Nathaniel. It doesn't sound friendly.

Sirius meets her eyes, and he can feel her influence trying to take hold of him.

Vampires can be extremely charming when they want. They have a magic of their own.

"Never meet a vampire's gaze," is the old saying. *"They'll seduce you if they want."*

Of course, Sirius is immune. He is an Occlumenes, so he focuses to close his mind to any outside influence.

It doesn't affect him.

She's tall, and she's wearing high heels, but she still doesn't reach his neck when she comes in front of him.

Sirius meets Voldemort's eyes over her head.

He looks amused, the fucker.

"Be a darling," she whispers against his shoulder. Sirius shudders. Perhaps he's not as immune to vampire charms.

Or maybe it's just his body's trained response when an attractive woman is plastered to his chest.

Perhaps it's just the thrill of it. Few people get to be bitten by vampires and live to tell the story. He'd always wondered how it would feel.

His mum had some intriguing vampire romance books; once, when Sirius was punished for two weeks, unable to leave the house, he read them out of sheer boredom.

But even he never dared to go looking for a vampire to experiment with. He's not that suicidal.

Yet it's safe now. He knows Voldemort won't let him get drained.

He bends slightly, tilts his head to the side.

"Lovely," she comments, her very cold fingers brushing Sirius' hair out of the way.

Sirius thought Voldemort was cold- and he is- but this lass is *dead*, so she's properly cold.

She has no soul, Sirius thinks, shuddering as she licks a strip of flesh. He feels the scrape of her fangs-

His mum's books were right. It is strangely erotic.

And then she bites.

It stings, but only a little. She doesn't do it fast, as a feeding vampire would. Oh no.

After she pierces his skin, her fangs slowly sink in deeper. And then she starts sucking.

Sirius is looking at Voldemort. He's vaguely aware the rest of the vampires are all watching on with jealously, fangs out.

The woman holds him tighter, her arms going around his waist. She's *strong*. But Sirius is strangely unconcerned about this.

It feels…nice.

Her freezing face starts warming up, tucked between Sirius' neck and shoulder.

"Enough," Voldemort says.

She doesn't stop. Voldemort takes out his wand-

Nathaniel says something, tone forceful, and the woman lets go of Sirius with a regretful sigh.

Sirius feels a tad dizzy, even if he couldn't have lost much blood.

He looks down at her only to meet her red, wide eyes. Mesmerising. Her lips are parted. A drop of blood runs down her chin.

Sirius feels a strong *urge* to kiss her, and he almost does it, before he remembers there are people in the room.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it.

She brings her wrist to her mouth and bites into it, before offering it to Sirius.

Right, right. Ritual, blood exchange.

It's known vampire blood is one of the most potent elixirs in their world. Far superior to any muggle drugs, Sirius heard.

Vampires had been hunted for it, and it's still sold in shoddy, unauthorised shops in Knockturn. It costs a fortune. But Sirius never tried it, despite its much-lauded properties, because Slughorn warned them about it, said the blood can go bad after it's been out of a vampire for a certain period.

"It can have disastrous effects. Straight from the source is another matter entirely, but I don't expect many-if any- people have the chance to receive it from a willing vampire."

Here is Sirius' chance.

He holds her wrist to his mouth. Distantly, he's aware this should be disgusting, but the famed vampire allure, their mysterious, magical appeal, must really work because he can easily push

the disgust aside.

It doesn't taste like anything- Sirius expected that metallic flavour, but there's none.

And yet as soon as the first drops go down his throat, he wants more. He's ravenous for it.

Glimpses of centuries passing by flash behind his eyes.

Clearer air, brighter stars, muggles with swords, a less populated London, a fight with a werewolf, a man dying under his fangs, wailing in pain.

Naked men and women under him, their hot, alive bodies-

She pulls her hand away, and Sirius blinks back into the cabin.

Fuck me, he thinks. *That was bloody brilliant.*

Sirius feels amazing. He feels strong, rested, and capable of anything. The colours are brighter around him, his hearing is as good as when he's Padfoot, picking up animals scurrying through the forest outside the cabin, their small heartbeats pumping blood.

He can feel the two heartbeats in the room, too. Rodolphus' strong one.

Voldemort's- slower, quieter.

He also discovers he's hard. And he's not the only one. One of the vampires, dressed in leather trousers, is clearly aroused.

Everyone is watching Sirius in silence.

"How do vampires get erections?" Sirius blurts out.

Rodolphus groans deeply, and he buries his head in his hands.

"It's a legitimate question," Sirius argues. “Vampires have no heartbeat, so how, exactly,-"

Nathaniel glides closer to Sirius. "I would be happy to explain."

Voldemort comes between them. "The deal is sealed," he says, pointing to the door. "You will hear from me soon."

"You'll be able to find me for the next hours," the witch whispers to Sirius. "My blood will lead you to me-"

"Out," Voldemort says, tone very soft, but there's a world of menace in it.

Nathaniel utters a command, and the other three vampires follow him out the door.

The woman was right. Sirius can feel her, even if she's no longer there. It's like a pull in his stomach.

His cock throbs in his trousers. Thankfully, he has proper wizard robes that will hide it from view.

"That was something," Sirius says, deciding to sit down. He doesn't need to sit- in fact, he's never been filled with such energy. But it's best he sits, so he can better ignore the urge to find the vampire.

The moment his hands curl against the back of a chair, to pull it from under the table-

The wood turns to splinters under his grip, breaking apart.

"Wow."

Yeah, that's right. Vampire blood is not only a powerful aphrodisiac, it also enhances one's strength.

Unicorn blood does the same, to a lesser extent. And some people become addicted to that since it's far easier to take blood from a unicorn than a vampire.

But drinking unicorn blood- hurting such a pure, innocent soul damns one's soul, it is said.

Drinking from a soulless, dead vampire is not considered evil. Just terribly dangerous since one has to deal with the vampire, first.

"How long will it last?" Sirius asks, gripping the table, just to test it, and grinning when it breaks apart under his touch. He's not even gripping hard.

"A few hours," Voldemort says. "It's best you're not alone until it's gone."

Does he know of Sirius' urge to follow the call inside him and Apparate to wherever it leads, to the vampire that shared her blood with him?

Tempting. Very tempting.

He really wants that. But then, who's going to stop her if she'll decide she wants all his blood?

"Yes," Rodolphus says, finally standing. "Come to the Manor. I'm sure Rabastan will be amused when you tell him what transpired. You may even use your temporary inhuman strength to destroy my statues. I know how much you hate them," he offers, all generous.

Those really are some hideous statues. They deserve to be destroyed. Bella *accidentally* shatters them often.

A flash of annoyance mars Voldemort's features. "Those impressive art pieces?" he drawls. "Unthinkable. Leave, Rodolphus. I'll handle him."

Rodolphus leaves, a tick in his jaw.

(-)

"I feel great," Sirius announces when they arrive at the cabin. "I love it."

"I imagined you would," Voldemort says, folding his outer robe over the back of the armchair.

"What if I become addicted? What then?" Sirius teases him. He walks behind Voldemort quickly. It's almost as if he's *flying*. Amazing stuff, vampire blood. He's careful when he pulls Voldemort to him, remembering how easily the chair at the meeting snapped when he gripped it. So he barely curls his fingers over Voldemort's shoulder.

"You won't," he answers, and he so easily gets out of Sirius' grip.

He can't even detect the spell being used, Voldemort doesn't use his wand- if Sirius didn't feel the subtle magic on his skin, he'd have believed Voldemort got out of his grip on physical merit alone.

"How do you know I won't? I'm addicted to everything. I'm irresponsible, I've also been called a drunk plenty of times, and-"

Voldemort walks to the kitchen, and Sirius trails behind him.

"You're not a drunk," Voldemort informs him, once more shrugging off Sirius when Sirius attempts to take hold of him.

"Everyone agrees I am, in fact, a drunk-"

"You're just young. Not a boy, not yet a man, but they expect you to shoulder responsibilities that would crush people twice your age."

They. *Does he mean my family or Dumbledore? Or both.*

That's the thing about Voldemort. Sirius doesn't feel like a failure around him. Which is odd since he's the only one that bests Sirius at everything. But he doesn't berate Sirius; even when he does something wrong in their duels, Voldemort simply explains it, almost gently. It's Sirius that gets frustrated with his own mistake, never Voldemort.

"Maybe they just have high standards," Sirius says, leaning against a counter that groans threateningly under his weight. *Morgana's tits, how do vampires navigate the world without breaking everything they touch?*

He watches Voldemort as he comes back from the pantry with some vials.

"They have unreasonable expectations, ones you can't possibly meet. They're setting you up for failure," Voldemort says, sitting at the table and mixing the substance in the vials in a bowl.

"Well, if you expect so little of me, perhaps you shouldn't duel me or sleep with me," Sirius snaps at him. "Sounds like you think I'm stupid."

Voldemort doesn't look up from his potion; a wrinkle appears between his brows, the one that Sirius started to refer as the 'focused wrinkle'.

"I didn't say stupid. I said young. Drinking, fighting, sleeping around- those are things young men should do; maybe you're overindulging, but it's quite different from expecting you to lead the most powerful family in Britain, at just sixteen; vastly different than sending you to spy on me, at nineteen years old. Dumbledore wouldn't have been able to spy on me when he was nineteen. Your father wouldn't have been able to lead your family at sixteen. You have the potential to become a great man, but Rome was not built in a day; a fine wine takes time to refine. There's a process to it, to anything great. You'll get there, but you need time. Scolding you for every real or perceived mistake won't hasten the process." He gives the contents of the bowl a final stir, and then he looks at Sirius. "Quite the contrary."

Something in his chest tightens, and Sirius doesn't like that feeling. So he sneers. "Bet you weren't drinking, fighting or making stupid decisions at my age."

He's still hard, even with the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. Such is the power of vampire blood.

Voldemort empties the contents of the bowl into a glass of water. He stands, comes closer to Sirius, and pushes the glass into Sirius' hand. "Comparing yourself to me is setting yourself up for failure. There are no men like me. Drink."

Sirius drinks, mainly to have something to do so he won't be tempted to tell Voldemort to go fuck himself. It only occurs to him that he didn't even ask what was in the glass once he already drank all of it.

He's stubborn, so he won't ask now, placing the glass on the counter beside him.

"The elixir is for breaking the feeble connection between you and the vampire," Voldemort says, sounding amused as if he knows exactly what Sirius was thinking.

And he does know; he always seems to know, even if he's not using Legilimency.

"Without it, she could have tracked you for as long as her blood was in your system."

"Perhaps I wouldn't have minded her finding me," Sirius says. "She was quite attractive."

"I'm sure you'd have appreciated her beauty as she would have sucked all your pure, precious blood," Voldemort drawls. "A peaceful way to die, but so wasteful."

Don't say it. Don't. Don't! Alas, if he had known when to shut his mouth, he wouldn't be Sirius Black. So he says it: "Wouldn't mind *someone* sucking me."

"Insolent boy," Voldemort says, but he's smiling, though it's clear he tried not to, his lips twitching.

Sirius makes sure to keep his eyes on those lips in what he hopes it's an indicative way. "I thought I was not to be scolded," he reminds Voldemort. "I'm just a young thing, enjoying life, right? Like I'm supposed to. I can't help myself."

Voldemort was already close, but he comes closer, slowly, until he's in Sirius' space. With no distance between them and Sirius leaning on the counter, Voldemort gains some inches over him. Immediately, Sirius straightens his back, gaining back those inches. Well, almost all of them. There's still a difference, negligible enough, but he can live with that. He has to; there's no way to make Voldemort less tall, unfortunately.

As it is, Voldemort only needs to bend his head slightly to speak into Sirius' ear.

"Ask nicely." His voice, his breath on Sirius' skin, the words themselves, the possibilities- all that travels down his spine, in a rush, straight to his nether region. "I know how proud you are." The lips are now directly over his ear, and it tickles, it's hot, and there's no more blood in Sirius' head, his own or of the vampire kind; it all went down to his cock, making it throb against Voldemort's hard body. "So I won't make you beg. But you'll have to ask nicely."

The bloody bastard. The arsehole. Evil incarnated, really, dangling the possibility in front of Sirius, knowing Sirius can't take it.

He's imagined Voldemort sucking him off plenty of times, but now it's almost real. Now it can happen. If only Sirius ‘asks nicely’.

Which he won't. He can't. Voldemort must know Sirius won't do it.

"What's the difference between begging and asking nicely?" Sirius demands, though his voice sounds less demanding and more desperate.

"Mostly semantics," Voldemort answers, licking just under Sirius' ear. "But we established you like illusions, so I suppose the difference would be whatever you need it to be to assuage your endless pride."

Sirius can see the scale in his mind; on one side, there is his pride, and on the other is Voldemort, kneeling at his feet, with Sirius' cock in his mouth.

For a moment, the scale is tipped overwhelmingly in favour of the dark lord sucking him off, but the figure holding the scales looks suspiciously like one of his ancestors- it doesn't matter which one, they're all the same and they'd agree on this matter- so the scale tips the other way.

Sirius keeps his pride, which always meant so much to him. In that moment, it doesn't feel like a victory, though, the way it usually does. In that moment, he's annoyed with it.

With himself, really, because there's no scale, there's no ancestor scowling at him; it's just Sirius and his stupid pride.

He grabs Voldemort's robe and flips them around so fast it's a blur. He forgot about his momentarily inhuman strength; he only remembers when Voldemort's body slams against the counter with a rather loud noise.

I hope it hurt him, the fucking prick.

If it did, Voldemort doesn't complain. Sirius kisses him, moving his other hand to grab Voldemort's braid. He hopes that hurts, too.

The room shifts around him, and when he draws back from Voldemort's lips, he finds they're in the bedroom.

The way this man Apparates… so smooth, noiseless, perfectly.

Gods, how Sirius hates him.

Yeah, you hate him very much, clearly, a sarcastic voice whispers in his head.

"You should ask before Apparition," Sirius scolds him. "Perhaps I wanted to bend you over the table."

He refuses to acknowledge the slight anxiety when he says that. Sirius says all sorts of filth during sex, but never to Voldemort. He always treads carefully with him, because Voldemort is proud, too, and Sirius never knows what would be crossing an imaginary line, what would be too much.

The anxiety quickly goes away when Voldemort simply says: "I *eat* at that table."

Apparently, Sirius didn't overstep. *What else could I get away with?*

But he's too agitated to test it that night. He'll shut up and use his body.

He ends up bending Voldemort over the bed, instead. But even if the vampire blood enhances his senses, even if he fucks Voldemort as roughly as he wants, because the man never complains, Sirius isn't satisfied when it ends.

Because Voldemort doesn't come, and the only way Sirius knows of to make him come is definitely not an option right then, not after the discussion in the kitchen, so Sirius is left frustrated, even if he's not the one still hard when they get dressed.

(-)

Back in his own house, which feels less and less like it's his with each passing day, to distract himself from his dissatisfaction, he thinks of what Voldemort said about people having unreasonable expectations of him.

He isn't sure how true it is. People should want him to be a good man; there is nothing unreasonable about that.

Only, Dumbledore gave up on Sirius being good long before, wants Sirius to kill someone, wants to use him for the good of the country.

And his family...

They don't want Sirius to be a good man. They want Sirius to be what they want him to be at any given time.

His father wasn't that way. Sure, he had expectations, too, but he understood Sirius. He was patient. His father wasn't big on compromises, yet he turned a blind eye to Sirius' antics whenever he could.

"If you stop reacting to every little thing he does, he'll stop doing it," Sirius hears his father talking.

He sits on the stairs quietly, eyeing the open door a bit further away down the hallway. He can't see his parents, just two shadows undulating on the wall opposite the fireplace.

He's supposed to be in his room, where his mother sent him after she caught him drinking with Evan and Avery.

"They were downing firewhiskey like it was water! They stole that bottle from Eugenia's-"

"Odd, isn't it, how he never steals anything or gets drunk when I go out with him."

"Not odd at all!" Sirius sees the smaller shadow approaching the larger one. "You let him drink right there at the table, so, of course, he wouldn't-"

"Yes, and he drinks one cup of wine and gets bored with it because there's no fun in drinking if he's allowed to do it. On the other hand, if he knows you'll find him and scream at him for an hour, now that makes it interesting for him, doesn't it?"

"So, what? I'm supposed to just shrug it off? Let him turn into an alcoholic, like grandfather?"

"He's only doing it to get your attention. Gods forbid you even look his way if it's not to scream at him. He's not turning into an alcoholic! He's fifteen! Boys that age -"

"You weren't like that! You never stole bottles of whiskey and drank them in some hidden room! No one ever found you with your hand down some boy's pants!"

"Perhaps I was well-behaved because I had a mother that loved me."

Sirius rests his forehead on his knees. He wishes he would have drank more; maybe if he had, he'd be in his room sleeping instead of hearing all of this.

The silence is brief and full of tension. He can imagine his mother getting worked up, her eyes narrowing, her cheeks getting redder-

"Or perhaps you behaved because you had a father that was home instead of spending his nights with harlots!" she screams, and yes, she got worked up, alright.

Sirius hugs his knees, trying to become smaller, hoping he'll melt straight through the staircase and just disappear entirely.

"This isn't my fault, Walburga. He isn't acting out to irritate me, I assure you."

"He hates me! I won't speak kindly to him when he stares at me with those eyes of his! You have no idea- no idea- how he disrespects me. You have no idea because you're never around!"

"How are you so delusional? How do you not see what you're doing to him? You truly think Sirius simply woke up one day and decided to hate you? The same boy that would trail after you all day long, wouldn't let go of your skirts? You did nothing wrong, did you? It's all him?"

"You taught him to hate me!"

"Gods, I can't tell if you truly believe that. If you told yourself that lie, over and over again, to absolve yourself of any blame until you actually started to believe it."

"It's not a lie!" she yells.

"Did you hit him?" he cuts over her. "I would hope you didn't, not after our last conversation on the subject."

"It was only a slap, don't look at me like that! If anything, you should have seen how he got all in my face, loomed over me. One of these days, if you don't get him in hand, he'll be the one slapping me!"

"I would certainly understand the urge if it comes to that," his father says, and it provokes his mother into making an inhuman sound filled with pure rage.

"What did you do now?" Sirius startles, but it's just Regulus, sitting down beside him. Quietly. Sometimes Sirius thinks his brother is more shadow than boy, always silent.

Sirius shrugs, miserable. He can't believe his mother said he might hit her back one day. He just can't fathom how she could think it, let alone say it.

"There's no point in discussing this with you; you're worse than a child, refusing to take accountability for anything." His father's voice gets dangerously low. The hairs on Sirius' arms stand up. Regulus huddles closer to his side. They both know that tone.

"I'm not-"

"Enough! I have no interest in hearing anything else. You're not punishing him over this. It's punishment enough he has you as a mother."

"Do you hear yourself?"

"From this moment on, you aren't allowed to discipline him. You have no empathy, no mercy for that boy. You look at him and only see me, you're punishing me, and I won't permit you to do that any longer."

"How dare you? He's my son, too!"

"You don't seem to be aware of that half the time. Keep your attention for your darling Regulus, and let Sirius be. I should have done this long ago, but I kept telling myself he needed a mother, that you'll get better. You failed. You keep failing. My harlots are doing a better job at it than you. So gods help you, Walburga, if you ever raise your hand at him again, if you ever yell at him again, if you try to exert any authority over him, then I will start exerting authority over you."

The shadows move; they become one for a moment before the smaller one shrinks, backing away.

"I assure you, that won't be pleasant."

Sirius and Regulus stand at once and duck behind a curtain that hides a secret passageway to the cellars. Just in time to hear their mother storming out of the room, slamming the door behind her. She knocks over every vase or candlestick she comes across, climbing up the stairs and muttering to herself.

She tried to ignore Sirius for a while after that, but Sirius wouldn't have it. He'd take her screams, her slaps, anything she had to give, but he could never stand to have her ignoring him.

So he'd provoke her until she did scream, he provoked her until she slapped him again, but they both made sure Regulus or Kreacher weren't around to see it happen and report it back to his father.

Fuck, he was already sick at the time, Sirius thinks, lying on his floor. *Did Mother know?* Sirius didn't, and neither did Regulus. They hid the illness from them until it couldn't be helped anymore.

"Go on, pick whatever you want," he says, not even a week after Sirius got caught drinking with Avery and Evan.

"I feel this is a trap," Sirius confesses, carefully eying the bikes.

His father smiles briefly. "You've been saying you want a bike all summer. Here we are. Or did you not mean it? Maybe you only said it to annoy Walburga."

"A bit of both," Sirius admits, still not daring to believe it.

"Pick one."

"But you hate muggle stuff," Sirius points out.

"I'm hoping once you have it, you'll lose interest. If you don't get it, you'd just keep going on about it."

Some hours later, once they have the bike, they both circle it, curious. It makes for a strange sight, parked in front of their country mansion.

"How did that insect say you start it?"

Sirius takes the key from his pocket and shoves them where the muggle showed him to do it. He twists the key

The engine roars to life.

"So loud," his father says with a sneer.

Sirius likes that it's loud. It was part of its charm. But his father was right; his interest in the bike decreased as soon as he was handed the keys.

Now he's far more interested in the fact that he's spending time with his dad, observing a strange muggle object.

They spend all day there, figuring it out together. His father draws a protection rune on the tank, but when Sirius suggests adding more runes for different purposes, he refuses.

"You'll have to figure them out yourself," he says, looking at Sirius in a strange way. "You'll have to figure many things out for yourself as you grow older."

Sirius frowns because usually, it's a variation of 'I'll guide you', or 'I'll show you,' or even straight 'I'll solve it', whenever Sirius gets into any amount of trouble.

People in his family don't 'figure things out', after all. They do things the way they're supposed to be done, the way they've been done since forever.

"I won't always be here to advise you," his father says. "But I trust you'll make good choices." He bites his lip in a rare show of expression. "Eventually."

"Thank you," Sirius says, unsure of where this is coming from but grateful to receive a compliment. They've been rare in the past years.

"Your mother says you acted inappropriately at Eugenia's party last weekend."

Ah, there it is. "She dragged me there against my will, and then I only had a few sips of-"

"Not the drinking." His father waves it away. "She said you were inappropriate with her. That you got in her face. Is that true?"

No. It's not. She slapped him in front of Evan and Avery, no less, so he snarled at her to leave him alone, but he didn't get in her face.

Sirius doesn't answer and turns his eyes to his bike. He shrugs, which isn't helping matters. His father hates shrugs. They're unbecoming.

But what are his choices? Rat her out? He hates her most of the time, but he still doesn't like the way his father speaks to her. But if he takes the blame, then he'll be in trouble.

Yet his father ignores the shrug, lets Sirius get away with not answering a direct question. That, too, is highly unusual.

"I know she's difficult," his father says. "I know she gives you every reason to despise her. But she's your mother, and you'll remember that."

Sirius nods.

"You have to learn how to control your temper. You can't let emotions rule you at all times."

"You told grandfather I'll grow out of it, remember?" Sirius says, trying to keep the sarcasm to a minimum.

"I lied," he says, and Sirius turns to gawk at him at the admission. One is not supposed to lie to one's father. "You are who you are. But you need to learn to control it better. Your temper makes you predictable, and more experienced men will take advantage of it if you let them, if you show them where to strike. It isn't wise to react to any provocation you encounter. These are dangerous times we live in, and you'll be done with Hogwarts sooner rather than later. You'll meet people that won't back down just because of your name. You cannot make yourself vulnerable by showing your heart to them."

Sirius forgot all about the bike after that day, in true fashion. No one hated it, no one yelled at him that he was not supposed to have it, so he left it at the summer mansion and forgot about it until he ran away from home, with nothing to remind him of his father. So he went and got his bike, spent years working on it, finding new charms, and complicated runes, researching ancient magic to scribble on the chrome parts, to add to the one his father put there.

(-)

He dreams he married Bella. He dreams of a black-haired, grey-eyed baby. They're in Grimmauld, seated together, close, so close, with their baby between them.

He dreams his father is there to smile down at his grandson. Sirius lets him, and *only* him, hold the boy.

It's beautiful. His father is very proud, and Sirius melts apart when he thinks his son will grow up around Orion Black. What a privilege for everyone involved. What a blessing.

"Morgana wouldn't force me to give birth to the enemy twice," Bella says, a hand resting on her expanding stomach. "This one will be a girl."

"Oh, I so wanted a daughter," his mother says, seated at his father's side. She smiles, but the smile sours fast. It turns into grief. Pain. So much pain." I wanted a daughter," she repeats quietly. "But mine died."

Sirius wakes with a gasp. His heart feels like it will jump out of his chest. It sends shooting pains down his arm.

He breathes carefully until he calms down.

He'd fallen asleep with the window open; the chill of winter bites at his exposed chest.

Sirius shivers, stands slowly, in a daze and heads to close the window.

The moon is half full, especially bright. Sirius looks up- his heart, racing so furiously just moments before, drops like a rock in his stomach.

Bellatrix is barely visible, unusually dim, especially for that time of the year.

It's nothing, he tells himself. Just a stupid dream. But the more he gazes at the stars, the dread settles in his bones, an unnerving feeling.

It's nothing, he repeats.

He knows his mother lost many pregnancies before she successfully delivered Sirius.

Years upon years of loss. Of *'failure'*, like his grandmother put it. As if Sirius' mother was doing it on purpose.

He was very much a wanted baby, the hope of their family.

The lost pregnancies were rarely mentioned after his grandmother moved to Paris.

But Sirius vaguely remembers his mother being pregnant *after* Regulus. He has an impression of jealousy, of fear that another baby will come and she won't have any time for Sirius at all.

He remembers a silent day, kept inside his room with Regulus, his paternal grandmother watching over them. He remembers hearing his mother's screams of agony.

Sirius banged his fists on the door, yelled at his grandmother that his mother is hurt and he has to help her.

"She isn't hurt, love. That's just the baby coming."

He remembers desperately wishing the baby would go away.

And it did.

No one ever told him anything. At the end of that long day, his grandfather came inside Sirius' room, face grave, whispered in grandmother's ear, and then Sirius and Regulus left Grimmauld with them.

'For a holiday.'

It was a very long holiday. When they returned, his mother was different. She wouldn't speak to his father. There was silence at dinner like never before.

No smiles between his parents. His father working more and more, always away, always a tense line to his shoulders.

His mother was made of stone one moment, of rage the next.

She seemed to hate Sirius, and Sirius thought that somehow he made the baby go away because he wished it so much, and that's why she hated Sirius now, when she used to love him before.

So he never asked about the baby. When he was much older, Bella told him what had happened. The baby, a girl, was born deformed. She struggled for days, clinging to life, before passing. Bella warned him never to speak of it, that his father had prohibited anyone from mentioning it.

They never put her on the family tree. There was no grave.

It was like it never really happened. Erased.

The dread of mentioning babies in his family had been so intense that it must be why Sirius is feeling it now.

The stupid dream, the stupid baby.

It's nothing. Just old secrets.

He tries to shake it off, but he keeps returning to the window. Bellatrix is barely visible.

His dread mounts. He can *feel* her for a second. Sirius stands at his window, in his empty house, and then he's in pain, someplace else, high above.

He blinks, grits his teeth and puts some clothes on.

(-)

"How the fuck did you find out?" Rodolphus asks when Sirius barges inside the Manor.

"Find out what?" He's desperate now. He *knew* something was off. "What happened? Where is she?"

Panic tries to choke him when he takes in Rodolphus. He has a sad air about him, and Rodolphus never looks sad.

Angry, bored, amused, sometimes hysterical, but not sad.

And the sigh- Sirius never knew Rodolphus could produce such a noise.

He tells Sirius all about it as they walk to Bellatrix's room; on their way, they see the house elf carrying bloody sheets. It's crying, big fat tears falling on ugly, withered cheeks.

"She's sleeping, but I'm sure she'll be happy to wake up to you," Rodolphus says when they reach the door.

Only Sirius enters.

Three candles are lit, throwing shadows all over the room, on Bella's sleeping form.

She looks so small in that immense bed.

He still hates her; he *does*. This changes nothing. But he can dedicate to his hate later.

He walks carefully, the carpet muffling the sound of his steps. She doesn't wake up even when Sirius sits carefully on the edge of the bed.

She looks at peace.

There are potion vials on her nightstand, some clearly empty, one knocked down-

Sirius takes her hand. She's warm and soft and *home*.

She opens her eyes, and a lazy smile stretches over her beautiful face.

Gods, how I missed her.

"You're such a soft weakling," she says, smacking her lips together in a way that makes Sirius think her mouth is dry.

He hurries to pour her a glass of water; it's hard, because she won't let go of his hand, but he manages to do it, a mix of flexibility and magic.

He holds her head up gently, holds the glass to her mouth and tells her to go slow.

"I'll slap Rod when I wake up. He shouldn't have called you, the manipulative bastard-"

"He didn't," Sirius tells her, smoothing some hair out of her face. She's sweaty, the hair clings to her neck. "I dreamed it."

She hums. She seems a little unfocused. Possibly the pain relief potions.

"My special boy," she says, her thumb circling his palm. "Don't look so panicked. I'm fine. These things happen sometimes."

"I dreamed we had a son," Sirius says, curling at her side. Even weak as she is she puts a slender arm around him and pulls his head to her chest.

Her heartbeat is strong, reassuring.

"Gods, I'd hate to have a son."

"You said that. You were pregnant again, and you said it must be a daughter this time."

She laughs. "We would have made the most beautiful of children. And they'd have been special, like you, the stars would have whispered secrets to them, too."

"Father was there," Sirius says. "He was holding the boy. Mum said her daughter died."

"Oh, Sirius."

She kisses his head, her hand curls tighter around him. "I'm not your mother," she says. "I'm alright. These things happen, you know? Especially in our family." She scoffs. "There must be a consequence, after all, to us marrying family members so often. I didn't particularly want a child, truth be told. If anything, I'm sorry for Rodolphus. He is crushed. Men are so weak."

He lifts his head. "You're sure you're alright?"

"Yes, yes. The Healer said I'll be good as new tomorrow-"

"I mean- I don't mean your body."

She takes his face in both of her hands. "Sirius, I'm fine. I swear."

"You could pretend you're not, and I'd stay with you if you told me you are unwell."

Sirius wants her to pretend, so he can stay and not feel guilty over Marlene. If Bella was truly ill, he would stay. If Bella was going to succumb to whatever plagued his mother after she lost her daughter, he'd stay. And he wants to stay, guilt-free, just so she can hold him.

She shakes her head. How is she so beautiful? How does she look so kind and soft when she-when she did what she did.

"If you want sweet lies and emotional manipulation, go to Cissa. I may be many things, but I am honest and I want your honesty, too. Not pity. Go," she says, though she doesn't sound upset. "Go, and hate me for as long as you wish. I'll be here when it passes."

"I can't forgive you."

"I don't need nor want your forgiveness."

Even so, Sirius stays with her until she falls back asleep.

(-)

He watches her carefully at the next Death Eater meeting. Rodolphus is watching her carefully, too.

Rodolphus made him swear Sirius won't tell Narcissa, because, pregnant as she is, Bella doesn't want to scare her.

Sirius told Cygnus instead, though it was bitter to talk to the arsehole.

But Bella loves her father. She hates him, too, and resents him deeply for making her feel insufficient, for not being the male heir he wanted.

But Druella had no interest in her two eldest daughters, that looked Black, and acted Black. She took some interest in Narcissa, with her lighter colouring and calmer disposition, but even then...

It was Cygnus and Kreacher that raised the girls. Cygnus did a terrible job, he had little patience and too much violence, but even so, he tried. He was the one there to answer questions when the girls had any; to heal a wound when they got injured. To hire them tutors and take them to dance classes. He was dragged to shops so Narcissa can choose pretty dresses and expensive dolls, so Bella can get dangerous potions and old books. He was the one that taught Andromeda how to ride and fly a horse.

Cygnus showed no emotion when Sirius told him; *they never do, do they?* His father must have been the same.

Men don't cry. Men don't suffer. Men aren't weak.

He must have had the same blank, uncaring expression Cygnus displayed, and his mother probably needed something else from him. Probably needed him to care.

He did care, Sirius knows. *He just couldn't show it.* He dealt with the pain the way Sirius does- ignoring it. No grave for his daughter, no mention, just shoved away and left in the past, because Orion Black couldn’t afford to look weak. He wasn’t allowed to mourn her.

"Don't tell Walburga," Cygnus said. "It would upset her."

Cygnus cares for his sister, too. They fight like crazy, they are awful to each other, but...they are blood.

And he must be a comfort to Bella, because Bella tells Voldemort happily that she'll be having dinner with 'daddy' after the meeting.

Does Voldemort know? he wonders. If he does, he treats Bella no differently.

And she does seem alright. She's right. She's not Sirius' mother. She wasn't pressured for years and years to produce an heir. She didn't lose countless of them.

Rodolphus is as stoic as they come, but never with Bella.

She's fine, and Sirius goes back to ignoring her.

(-)

Voldemort is messing with Sirius, without a doubt. It's frustrating because Sirius is trying to give him what he wants, but the man just won't take it.

Twice, Sirius came to his home the right amount of drunk, a state in which he wouldn't have protested to any role reversals during sex. Of course, those were the *only* times Voldemort didn't attempt to reverse their roles.

And there was that one time when Sirius was so drunk they didn't even have sex at all. Or, Sirius assumes they didn't because he woke up with no memory of the previous night, a tremendous headache, in Voldemort's bed, with a hangover potion on the bedside table and all his clothes still on.

Difficult arsehole.

At least Sirius can get him to come now- only with blowjobs, but it still counts, doesn't it?

"Here," Lily says, handing him the vial. "I did my best."

Sirius would have experimented himself, only he doesn't have where to brew, what with the state of his empty house, and, besides, he's great at Potions when he puts his mind to it, but Lily is just as gifted.

She used to be even better, but that was when she had Snape as a mate, whispering instructions in her ear.

And, speaking of Snape, she bites her lip, looks away from Sirius and says: "Severus actually brewed something similar. He tweaked a calming potion to suit his needs. He was afraid of heights, but he was determined to learn to fly, so he'd use this."

Sirius scrunches up his nose, glaring at the vial. But what does it matter? Whatever Snape is, he's a little, greasy Potion Master in the making. If that's where Lily got the recipe...what does it matter?

"Thanks, Lily."

She nods but still doesn't look at him, lounging on the couch, absentmindedly rubbing her belly. It's tiny, but Sirius thinks he can now see some proof that she's carrying his godson. Or goddaughter. James wants to be surprised, and Lily decided to indulge him so they didn't perform the charms that would let them know if Sirius should spend ridiculous amounts of money on cute blue outfits or on pink ones.

He's already bought Draco stuff when Narcissa drags him along to different shops. The Malfoys did not want to be surprised- oh, no.

Sirius won't ever say it out loud, and neither will James, but he knows James wants a son, too. Perhaps not as rabidly as Lucius wanted a boy, but...no matter what, James is still a pureblood from a relatively old family. He'll want a son to carry on his name. He'll want a daughter, too, eventually, but he wants a son, first.

He's already speaking of having seven children. *"My own Quidditch team"*.

"Delusional," Lily called him.

Sirius doesn't want children of his own, even if his mother, and now grandfather, apply more and more pressure on him to marry every time he sees them.

Sirius can't imagine it; it would be yet another way to lose his father. If Sirius becomes a father, it's like he's replacing his own, in a way, like he's no longer a son, but a parent. It's weird, confusing, and makes no sense, but that's the case with most of Sirius' thoughts.

"Sirius?"

"Hm?"

Lily finally looks at him. "Is- do you know anything about Severus?"

"Come on, you know I can't talk about-"

"I won't tell anyone! Not Dumbledore, not James- just, please. I need to know.” She breathes in, steeling herself. Is he a Death Eater?"

He really can't image why someone like Lily would be friends with Snape- bitter, ugly, whining Snape. He doesn't get it, never did.

He wonders if they still talk; if maybe they exchange letters. He doubts it- Snape and his posse spent their last years at Hogwarts practically bragging they would do 'great things' once they were out of school and calling everyone a mudblood. Lily is unlikely to have gotten over that.

"I say stupid shit, too, sometimes," Sirius once pointed out, in their seventh year, when she would refuse to even look at Snape.

And it was a very small class: Lily, Sirius, Snape, Evan and a Ravenclaw were the only ones to have made it to N.E.W.T level Ancient Runes. It made for what Sirius assumed was an uncomfortable hour for the others; not for him, he didn't give a fuck, but the rest certainly weren't having a good time.

"And you still talk to me." Granted, she never heard him call anyone a mudblood, but still- there had been some outbursts here and there that Sirius had been made aware were 'out of place and insensitive’.'

She rolled her eyes at him. *"Firstly, I don't have much of a choice, you came with James as a package. Then, you're a pureblood- you don't get some of these things; at least you try. But for Severus to act this way, when he knows, when he understands..."*

She sounded pained back then, and she looks pained now.

"No," Sirius says. He doesn’t want Lily in any discomfort. Sirius wants to protect her and the baby. He shrugs. "Not that I've heard of, at least."

Relief washes over her pale face. Her hand resumes patting her belly.

"Maybe he came to his senses, the idiot."

"Probably," Sirius lies.

"I'm home!" James yells, and the front door slams shut. Lily straightens on the couch and brushes a strand of hair out of her face.

Just like that, Sirius knows the Snape topic is closed, and he's thankful for it.

"What do you need the potion for, anyway?" she asks, as James' disembodied voice comes closer, mentioning something about having found the pizza Lily was craving and bragging of his 'perfect interaction with the muggle restaurant'. "You're not one to feel anxious about anything."

"Oh, it's for Peter. He's planning to ask a girl out, but you know how he gets; he was too ashamed to ask you to brew it; don't tell him you know, he'd be mortified. Best not tell James, either. You know how he likes to tease Pete."

It's getting so easy to lie to his friends these days.

(-)

The potion is great. It doesn't alter his sobriety in any way, he's fully rational- or well, not less than usual- but he's just very...calm.

He tests it by thinking of his father, of those last awful days, and when not even that makes him want to crawl into a hole in the ground and die, Sirius knows it will do.

It does hinder him in the duelling practice once he arrives at Voldemort's house because Sirius' constant stress that he's not as good as Voldemort- not even close- is dimmed down, so he doesn't give it one hundred percent.

Curiously, halfway through dinner, he knows the potion left his system. Did he take it too early? But no, it's supposed to last longer-

Sirius grabs his wine goblet, swirling the liquid inside it.

Did he put something in it? An antidote? But why? Did Voldemort realise Sirius was under the effects of a potion? Even if he'd deduced something wasn't quite right, why in the world would he want to interfere?

Sirius glares at him. Voldemort smiles *innocently,* an expression that looks terribly out of place on his terrifying face.

"Is something the matter?"

"No," Sirius growls.

If he acknowledges Voldemort gave him an antidote, they'd have to speak about why Sirius was on a calming potion, and they are most certainly not doing that.

Fine, then. Fine. Fuck him. I tried.

(-)

He really missed these gatherings. He told himself he hadn't, for the longest time, but he can't deny it any longer.

The value of entertainment this circle provides is far superior to anything else. And the veil of elegance, even at an informal get-together, appeals to something inside Sirius.

And, of course, the viciousness.

Mr MacNair had finally found a husband for his daughter, to Rabastan's increasing displeasure. Rabastan had hoped it won't last, but now it's official, and she's making the rounds with Paul the Australian, introducing him to society.

Paul is a rich pureblood, but rather new blood. Or newer than what is considered 'perfectly pure' in Britain.

"What is wrong with him?" Voldemort had asked, mildly interested, after the last Death Eather meeting, when he caught them talking about Paul. *"Isn't he a rich pureblood?"*

"Nouveau riche," Lucius scoffed, his nose wrinkling in distaste. *"His gold has been accumulated only in the last fifty or so years."*

Voldemort blinked at him, a quick and rare expression of exasperation on his face, and dropped the subject.

He probably doesn't understand that, in these lunatic circles, even the money has to be old; that the Macnairs, even if recently impoverished, are very old blood, and their name carries far more weight than their future in-laws.

And rumours of Evy's rebellious, scandalous nature had not reached Australia. Even if it had, Paul's family is so desperate for an 'in' that they would probably ignore her reputation.

"Be nice," Narcissa warns Sirius and Rabastan when the elf goes to allow the guests in.

They're in Lestrange Manor. Sirius decided to attend because he knew it would be fun and because Rabastan asked him to.

Narcissa is there with Lucius. Rodolphus looks bored beside Bella.

Rabastan and Sirius smirk at each other.

They aren't nice. It's not in their nature to be nice to an outsider, and this man will have to jump through all sorts of hoops before he will be considered one of them, *if* it will ever happen.

Everyone there considers Evy's marrying below her station.

She looks annoyed as she and Paul are welcomed in the grand, gloomy, imposing living room.

"At least be polite," Narcissa hisses again, quietly, sending a knowing look Rabastan's way.

They are polite, so polite that poor Paul thanks Lucius as he's insulted in so many backward ways, he will only unpack it all in the following days. No one knows how to insult people like Lucius does, dressing it all up with a veneer of respectability.

Rodolphus stares at Paul, silently. Threateningly. Paul never meets his gaze.

Rabastan and Sirius flirt shamelessly with Evy.

Even Narcissa snubs him, in that cold, polite way of hers.

And when the man asks about the whereabouts of a bathroom, Bella gives him confusing instructions, sending him down a maze of hallways that is hard to navigate even for those familiar with Lestrange Manor.

As soon as he's gone, Sirius and Rabastan sit on each side of Evy.

"He is dreadfully boring," Sirius teases her.

She sighs. "I hoped you lot will scare him away."

"I can scare him," Rabastan says, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear. "If you want me to."

"Please, his father wants access to our circles so much, he'll Imperio his stupid son to marry you, if he has to," Lucius says.

Evy sighs again. She looks in the direction of the doors her fiancé had disappeared through. "Maybe I'll make a man out of him, eventually."

Rodolphus snorts, his only contribution to the conversation in the last hour.

"The first thing you need to do is dress him appropriately," Narcissa says, putting down her teacup. "He's not in his little colony anymore. Those robes are dreadful."

No one else would call Australia 'little'; no one sane, at least.

"A hopeless task," Evy says, batting away Rabastan's hand. "Stop that, he'll come back."

"I'm not sure about that," Sirius says. "You need a map and three benevolent fairies to get you out of the west wing."

"Plenty of time for a little get-together," Rabastan says, winking at Evy, getting even closer.

Narcissa gives him a disapproving look. "I'll be on my way before things degenerate," she announces, standing.

Lucius stands, too, leads her to the Floo, and kisses her hand before sending her through. But Lucius always enjoys humiliating people, so he doesn't leave with her.

"Come on, we'll be quick," Rabastan whispers, so only Evy and Sirius get to hear it.

"You're always *quick,*" Evy quips.

Sirius barks out a laugh.

"You're no better," she turns to smirk at him.

"Oh, fuck off, I was fifteen," he snaps back. "I assure you, my stamina's increased."

"I'll have to see it before I believe it."

"Black, back off," Rabastan barks at Sirius from Evy's other side.

"Knock it off," Rodolphus' voice makes the three of them startle. "If you don't want to get beheaded," he adds, looking at Sirius and Rabastan.

"Please, I'd make short work of her puny Australian-"

"Walden just arrived," Rodolphus cuts over his brother.

"Oh, shit!" Rabastan quickly heads back to his armchair. Evy laughs at him, before turning to Sirius.

"You should move, too."

"I'm not afraid of your stupid brother," Sirius scoffs.

"Have you seen him lately?" Lucius enquires, pouring himself a glass of scotch.

"Walden!" Bella exclaims just then, standing to receive her new guest.

"Dear gods, what is he eating?" Sirius asks, shocked by the sheer size of Macnair.

He didn't use to be so big.

Evy giggles.

"Is that a- what's on his back?" Sirius wonders.

"He must have come straight from work," Evy whispers as Walden kisses Bella's hand and then shakes Rodolphus'. "He's a Ministry executioner now, so he uses that thing to behead things."

"Bye," Sirius says, going to sit by Rabastan.

Walden shakes Lucius' hand, too, then turns to give Sirius a look.

Sirius meets his eyes, but Walden just scrutinises him for a moment before he nods. "Black," he says.

Sirius nods back.

"Where's Paul?" Walden enquires, looking around.

"He's lost," Evy explains. "Bella sent him to the wrong wing. Put the sword away, please."

"It's not a sword," Macnair snaps at her, but he takes the scythe off his back and lets it lean against a tall end table.

"Do tell us, how is the life of the working class?" Lucius asks with a smirk.

"It's fucking awful." Walden is apparently used to Lucius' comments, so he doesn't take it to heart. "Today they sent me to kill a *'mostly dead'* Cerberus that apparently came out of the Forbidden Forest next to Hogsmeade. Easy job, right?" He snorts. "So off I go, thinking I'll make it back in time for lunch. And then I get there, and turns out- it wasn't mostly dead at all. It was a pregnant female and mighty angry."

Rodolphus laughs.

"Chased me all around the village, the bitch." He shudders and accepts a glass of scotch from Rabastan. "I saw my life flash before my eyes, and all I could think of was how much you arseholes will laugh if you hear I got eaten by a Cerberus."

"I wouldn't have laughed," Evy says, patting his leg. "Not in public, at least."

"So I cut off one head, and then the second, I'm exhausted, I can barely see- and let me tell you, a Cereberus with only a head looks even creepier than with all three of them. And then, there comes Hagrid. *Fucking Hagrid*," he hisses, downing his glass in one go. "He started screaming after me. 'Murderer, murderer! Why did you attack her?'

"Gods, you should have decapitated him by 'mistake'," Lucius says, shaking his head.

"I would have, but then a little crowd started gathering around. No matter, I'm sure I'll have to go to Hogsmeade plenty to kill monsters in the future, and I can count Hagrid will be there to defend them. Anyway, I finally put the beast down, I'm drenched in blood, I go back to the Ministry, only to be sent to Northern Ireland because there's a harpy causing havoc there." He looks at Evy. "I can't wait to be rich. Where is our meal ticket? Wouldn't want to lose him." And then, to Rabastan: "You stay away from her, you hear me? Unless you want to marry her."

"Well-" Rabastan starts, but Rodolphus cuts him off.

"No," he says, simply.

"Do they need another executioner?" Sirius asks, thinking it's something he could do. Can't be very hard, right? And it doesn't sound boring at all, unlike most workplaces. "What are the requirements for the job?"

"Why?" Walden asks, confused.

"Sirius is pretending he's poor," Bella says. "Ignore him."

"I'm not pretending. I'm in debt, living on borrowed gold-"

"Oh, shut up," Lucius snaps. "You're throwing a tantrum, is what you're doing. It's getting old."

Sirius opens his mouth to answer, but Rodolphus stands suddenly. "Our lord is here," he says.

Oh, no. Fuck, Sirius thinks, as he checks to see if his braid still looks good, or if he needs to redo it.

Not a second after Rodolphus announces it, Voldemort strolls inside the living room.

In the blink of an eye, everyone is off their seats and kneeling.

Except for Sirius and Evy. They both stand and look at each other, and then Evy makes an awkward curtsy.

"Rise," Voldemort says, ignoring her. His red gaze falls on Sirius for a second before shifting it to Rodolphus. "We need to talk." He gestures at Lucius, too. "You should come along, as well, since you're already here," he tells Walden.

Without another word, he turns and walks to the office, the men marching after him.

Bella, being Bella, goes along, even if she wasn't asked. Perhaps Voldemort just assumes she'll trail after him at all times, no need to waste words to ask her.

"Merlin," Rabastan whispers after a few seconds of silence. "I swear he takes ten years of my life anytime he shows up unannounced."

Sirius tries not to be jealous that he wasn't called. *It's ridiculous, stop it.*

"Was that a *curtsy*?" Rabastan asks, mocking.

Evy huffs. "I'm surprised you could see it, what with your nose on the *floor.*" She mocks back, making Rabastan scowl. "I didn't know what to do, alright?"

"You're not a Death Eater, you don't have to do anything."

"Yes, well, it's awkward when everyone throws themselves on the floor, and I'm the only one left standing." She gives Sirius a questioning look. "You're not with him? I could have sworn you were, and that's why everyone speaks to you again."

Sirius doesn't answer. He gets over his panic at *'with him',* understands Evy simply meant politically, not...intimately.

When all their heart rates go back to normal, Rabastan goes back to flirting with Evy, though they're both anxious.

Apparently, it's difficult to feel aroused with the dark lord in proximity. Or it's difficult for other people, sane people.

People that aren't Sirius.

Whatever it was, it doesn't last long. Only Bella and Lucius return from the office, informing Evy that Walden had to leave, so did Rodolphus.

"Is he still here?" Rabastan asks, voice low.

"Yes," Bella says, adoringly. "I'm hoping he stays for dinner."

"Right." Rabastan looks at Lucius. "Can I have dinner at yours tonight?"

"You may," Lucius says graciously. "Come along, I'm going now."

Rabastan doesn't need to be told twice.

Bella fucks off, too, gods knows why or where. Maybe to avoid Sirius since it's harder to ignore each other without the others there; maybe she went back to worship Voldemort.

Sirius is left alone with Evy, and then-

"Oh, gods! Paul!" she says, a hand on her chest.

"Who?"

"Paul, my fiancé! He's in the west wing. Where the office is. Come along, I need to find him before the dark lord meets him in a hallway."

"Are you sure? If he's dead, you won't have to marry him anymore," he jokes.

Evy seems to actually consider it for a minute, before she shakes her head.

"Come on, help me out."

"Where is your chaperone?" a portrait asks, as Sirius and Evy venture into the west wing. "Young man, it isn't proper-"

Sirius flicks his wrist at it, shuts it off.

"Where is your chaperon?" he asks Evy.

She laughs. "They gave up on it. 'No reason to guard something that's been lost long ago,' Father said. In fact, he wouldn't be upset at all if I'd mess around with Paul. Eyes on the prize seems to be his new motto."

"At least he's not..." Sirius considers his words. "I mean, Pauls seems like a tame idiot. Better that than some other options. You'll have him wrapped around your little finger soon enough."

"Yeah," she says, gloomily.

"Or you could just leave," he suggests.

She bristles. "That's your solution to everything, isn't it? We're not all cowards here, Sirius. I have a duty to my family, that raised me and loved me. Gods know most fathers wouldn't have put up with a daughter like me, yet he did, even if he complained."

"And now he's selling you off," Sirius spits, upset to be called a coward.

"Now it's my time to help them." She shrugs. "You'll see. You won't escape it, either. You'll grow up and realise this is what we do. You can't ignore your duty to House Black forever."

"Watch me," Sirius mumbles.

"Where the fuck is he?" She stops by a portrait. "Excuse me, Madame, have you seen a poorly dressed foreigner with blond hair?"

"Forget it," Sirius drags her along by the elbow. "They've been charmed to blindness and deafness in this part. We're close to the office, and *things* happen here that no one can know."

"Oh." She stops, forcing Sirius to stop. "Oh," she says, again, and she looks up at him with fear and uncertainty.

"You're fine," he assures her.

She breathes deeply, gathers her courage and nods. She starts walking again, but this time, she's the one to grab his elbow tightly.

"It's just unnerving to be around *him*," she whispers.

"You're fine," he says again. "Though I'm surprised you found yourself in his company."

"A handful of times," she confesses. "Around this cursed Manor and Evan's-" She stops. Blinks.

Evan. It still hurts, a little pang in Sirius' chest. Especially since he'll forever associate Evan's death with Marlene's.

He bends and gives her a quick kiss on the temple, to soothe her pain.

And that's when Voldemort shows up. Out of fucking nowhere.

Well, most likely he got out of a room, but still- he's not there one moment, and then he *is.*

Evy yelps, moves even closer to Sirius.

Voldemort looks even more...tempting when he's terrifying people. Sirius doesn't get to see him this way often, since he usually sees him on his own, or around the Lestranges and Lucius who aren't prone to fear.

And the shadows- oh, the shadows suit him perfectly, in the gloomy, creepy hallway. It makes his eyes stand out even more than usual.

Evy's fingers tighten so much on his elbow that it's starting to be painful, nails digging into his skin, even through the robe.

"Have you seen a confused Australian? We lost him," he explains.

"I have."

"Oh, gods," Evy whispers, now almost entirely *behind* Sirius.

"I gave him directions. The right ones, this time," Voldemort says, amused.

"Helpful, as always," Sirius quips, but he feels a stupid smile spreading on his face. "Come along." He pulls Evy with him.

"Stay for dinner. Bella is preparing a feast, but I'm afraid Rodolphus won't return in time to enjoy it, and I believe Rabastan fled."

"Fine," Sirius says, just because Evy is now pulling him along, faster, and he doesn't have the heart to make her endure Voldemort's presence any longer so Sirius can fight about dinner.

She exhales, with a shudder, as they turn a corner.

"Who's the coward, now?" Sirius mocks her.

"Oh, shut up! I don't know how you can stand to eat with him. Rabastan tells me it gets very uncomfortable."

"Only for weak men. Or women."

They find Paul in the living room, standing around, confused, indeed.

"Did I get the wrong room again?" he asks. "Where is everyone? And why is there a scythe-"

"It shows up around once in a while. A very cursed object. Likes to behead unsuspecting people," Sirius says, and Paul grows pale.

"It's Walden's," Evy says, letting go of Sirius. "But they all had to leave on urgent business. They wanted to say goodbye, but we couldn't find you."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I got lost. This manor is huge! I'd still be lost if I hadn't encountered a...hmm.. distinguished-looking gentleman. He helped me out. Is he a Lestrange?"

Evy and Sirius exchange a look.

"He's..." she trails off. "Doesn't matter. Let's go home, shall we?"

(-)

During dinner, Voldemort attempts to make Bella and Sirius talk to each other. They're seated on his right and left, but refuse to engage.

Bella goes on about a book on magical theories, asking Voldemort's opinion about it. She's a huge nerd, too, but only when it comes to disturbing magic.

She used to read ancient tomes aloud to Sirius as bedtime stories, when she would babysit him.

Sirius muses about dangerous beasts and that he might actually make a good executioner.

Both Voldemort and Bella ignore him.

Once they're done eating, Voldemort leans in, and reaches inside Sirius' robes, grabbing his fags.

"You can't smoke here," Sirius snaps at him, attempting to wrestle back his pack, but Voldemort is quick. Quick as a *thief,* the fucker. "Bellatrix can't stand it."

Voldemort turns to Bella, who's frowning, looking between them.

"I don't mind," she lies, the silly woman. She always makes Rodolphus go into the gardens when he wants to enjoy a cigar, and she always hounds Sirius over the 'disgusting habit'. "I didn't know you smoke, my lord."

"Sirius is rubbing off on me," Voldemort says with a lazy smile.

To get revenge, Sirius steals his wine. He emptied three goblets already, and the stupid elf hadn't come to refill it.

Bella's eyebrow lift from the frown, almost to her hairline.

She still looks beautiful, even with that startled, comical expression.

(-)

Sirius feels only a tiny bit guilty when he summons the elf; mainly because he's been getting along well with his mother, and the elf's death is bound to upset her.

I'll get her a new one. A better one. Younger, saner.

"Bad Master asked for Kreacher," Kreacher says, every syllable filled with *insolence*, and Sirius' guilt goes away just like that, especially when the demented thing looks around Sirius' living room and makes a disgusted sound. "Living like a pig, bad Master does. Like he is a lowborn man from an ordinary family-"

"Shut up!"

Kreacher does, but he's so distressed over the filth in Sirius' living room, all the ashtrays and bottles, clothes scattered everywhere, that his knobbly, wrinkled fingers keep twitching as if he needs to clean it up.

He would; an elf is supposed to take care of its Master; it's in the bond between them, one that Sirius inherited from his father, who inherited from his father, and so on, for six generations.

"You'll clean up once you return," Sirius says, to get Kreacher to focus. Amber eyes turn to him, glowing from underneath white eyebrows.

"Return from?"

"A man will be here shortly to collect you. You are to do whatever he instructs you to, without argument."

The order takes hold, and Kreacher nods. Sirius touches his mark, and within seconds Voldemort shows up at his door.

Because he's a nerd, his eyes fall on a book lying on a pile of laundry rather than focusing on the disaster in the house. Or the elf. He barely acknowledges Kreacher, who stares up at him with suspicion.

Kreacher, who's more fanatical about blood purity than most human blood purists Sirius knows, narrows his eyes at Voldemort, looks him up and down, probably wondering why he can't place him in any ancient lineages he'd met along the centuries. His bushy eyebrows twitch, his jaw spams, and Sirius just knows he'll start muttering to himself, something offensive and insulting about blood.

"Shut up," Sirius orders him. "Not a word. Do your duty in silence."

Kreacher glares at him, but he can't disobey a direct order, so his teeth grind against each other.

"I'll take my leave," Voldemort says.

"Have fun."

"Follow," Voldemort demands of Kreacher, presumably, but he's not looking at the angry elf.

Once more, as they leave the house, Sirius feels a twinge of guilt, what with the striking image they make, walking away, Kreacher barely reaching Voldemort's knee, boiling with indignation, but following his orders nonetheless.

His father really treasured that abhorrent creature, Sirius is reminded.

"He can't disrespect my guests!" Cygnus hisses, mad, after Kreacher muttered under his breath about the 'dubious company Master Cygnus keeps these days', when his uncle came to their summer mansion with a couple of men. "You disgusting creature, learn your place."

"He knows his place," Sirius' father said. "He might be an elf, but he's a Black elf."

Kreacher preened at his side, fingers going over the family crest painted on his sheet.

"That alone places him above those friends of yours. To say nothing of the fact he's painfully more intelligent than those cretins."

Cygnus leaves in a fury of robes, and his father winks at Kreacher, offers him a piece of chocolate from the plate on the table.

Sirius sighs.

Stop it! He's hateful, he made your childhood more difficult than it needed to be, and he's ancient.

He takes his mind off it with a few shots of vodka, and when that proves insufficient, he heads over to a pub. On his way, he notices the book is *gone.*

Sirius smiles, forever irritated but amused with Voldemort stealing habits.

When he returns, decently drunk, he almost screams in alarm when he sees a shadow moving in the dark.

He has his wand out before he can blink, the candles light up on the walls, and Sirius is already mid-casting when he realises it's Kreacher.

What the fuck?

Voldemort strongly implied he wouldn't return. How dare he leave Kreacher alive when Sirius already thought he got rid of it, and *felt bad* about it, too.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asks, startled.

Kreacher is twitching all over, holding a damp cloth. He looks unwell, skin twinged with green.

"Cleaning," he says, teeth clattering.

Indeed, some of the filth in the living room disappeared, and Kreacher is is attempting to wash a stain on the floor, but her's shivering so badly, moaning in pain.

"What is wrong with you?" Sirius demands. "What happened?"

The tale that follows, between bouts of whimpering, sobers Sirius up instantly.

The elf talks of a cave, of a potion he was made to drink.

"It made Kreacher remember all of Kreacher's Blacks, the ones that are lost," he sniffs. "Beloved Masters, moving on, saying goodbye to Kreacher as Kreacher comforted them in their final hours."

A torture potion, Sirius knows. Probably tweaked to be more extreme, but one that makes the drinker relieve his worst memories, get trapped within them, with no hope of escaping, locking them in their head, incapacitating them.

Definitely tweaked, he thinks, when Kreacher said it made him extremely thirsty.

"So Kreacher had to drink after the mudblood left. Kreacher went to drink from the lake, but dead men came out of it, with dead eyes and blue skin."

Inferi.

They dragged Kreacher to the bottom, trying to drown him.

"Kreacher wasn't sure if Kreacher was supposed to die or not, but the mudblood didn't order Kreacher to die, and Bad Master said to clean up the pigsty when I return. So Kreacher returned to clean."

Oh, you fool, Sirius thinks of Voldemort. *You muggle-raised fool.*

How would Voldemort not know that if he didn't kill the elf, it will return back home?

"Take me there," Sirius demands.

Kreacher tries to refuse, which is *outrageous.* It brings the tiny thing another bout of pain, from directly attempting to disobey his Master.

Still, he's stubborn, and he keeps attempting to refuse.

"It is a bad place! A bad place for Master! Master would be in danger there! Kreacher can't put a Black in danger, even Bad Master."

"Take me, you foul thing!"

(-)

Slytherin's locket. Slytherin's fucking locket glints under the clear potion protecting it, looking exactly like the paintings Sirius saw of it in 'The Founders and the lost treasures' book he was made to read by his tutors before he attended Hogwarts.

Supposedly, the famed locket, Salazar's most precious possession, had been lost long before, with dozens of theories spawning over the years over where it might have ended up.

One of them suggested the locket was good and safe, where it was supposed to be, with Salazar's descendants. With the Gaunts. But the book refuted the claim, assured readers the Gaunts had fallen into poverty and had long sold all their possessions.

The cave is dark, surrounded by a lake. Sirius and Kreacher stand in the middle of it, on a small island.

For a second, Sirius thinks of making Kreacher drink the potion again, so Sirius can hold the priceless locket, make sure his eyes aren't deceiving him, that Sirius has actually ended up stumbling upon one of the most searched items in recent history. But he reconsiders. No need, after all. Sirius knows what this is.

What it must be.

Of course he didn't kill me when I found out about his ring. Not if he has another Horcrux.

He just knows it's a Horcrux. Voldemort would wear it, otherwise. He clearly likes to display the Gaunt ring, there on his finger to reinforce his claim that he's Slytherin's Heir, proof enough to convince members of the Sacred Families of his lineage without having to actually explain who, exactly his parents were.

But he wouldn't wear *two* Horcruxes, would he?

"Shouldn't you hide it somewhere safe?" Sirius asked Voldemort when they discussed the ring. *"If I had one, I'd hide it in my house. Or in my- the Black vault. No one can get inside either."*

*Voldemort gives him a look. "*I *don't have impenetrable houses or vaults in the depths of Gringotts."*

A second Horcrux. Unheard of. Just-

The idea makes him sick to his stomach.

It also makes his blood burn, because how powerful can a man be, to survive the ritual *twice*?

"I doubt you'd be willing to go through it again, no matter how brave you were the first time," Sirius told him, when Voldemort shared just how painful it had been to make a Horcrux, how terrifying.

And Voldemort smiled at him, amused, as if he knew something Sirius didn't.

"Morgana's tits," Sirius says. "Fucking hells. Fuck!"

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” The word echos in the cave, comes back to Sirius over the still waters.

Waters that hide an army on Inferi.

At least a hundred, Kreacher said, when Sirius made him guess how many there were.

Sirius takes out his wand. He casts around until he feels the AntiAppartion wards, strong ones, even stronger than the ones Voldemort has around his house. Of course, muggle raised as he is, he must have forgotten, *somehow*, that Apparition wards mean absolutely nothing to an elf.

How is he so intelligent, so absurdly powerful, and yet so stupid?

What an incredible lapse in judgement.

He made the wards so strong even Voldemort himself wouldn't be able to Apparte inside the cave. Sirius is good with wards, and he knows these deny Apparition to any wizard, even the caster. So there must be another way in. Sirius casts several charms until one bounces off the right way. He sends dozens of flames on that path until he can see the shore.

"Take me there," he orders Kreacher, who easily Apparates them where instructed.

After more charms, Sirius finds the boat. A cursed boat meant to carry only one wizard.

No doubt, himself.

He's insane, clearly. He isn't thinking right. This boat would carry however many werewolves it could. It would carry vampires. A bunch of children that hadn't reached magical maturity. The charm wouldn't recognise them as 'wizard or witch' because the charm is the invention of a long-dead bigoted, traditional wizard that only saw humans as being worthy of the title.

How could Voldemort think the generic 'wizard' term would cover everyone in their world?

Because he truly considers werewolves and vampires to be wizards or witches if they can do magic.

And it's such a complicated charm- all the wards and spells around the cave are perfect, powerful-

And yet he forgot an elf can Apparate anywhere it pleases.

He finds more wards at the entrance of the cave; blood wards, but not tied to a person; just wards requiring sacrifice in blood. Sirius examines them, and yes- it's so Voldemort can identify whoever attempted entrance, whoever was foolish enough to give blood to them. It would lead Voldemort right to them. If the supposed thief somehow survived the torture

potion and the lake full of Inferi, that is. If the thief still had the strength and presence of mind to cast Fiendfyre after the potion, which is pretty much the only safe bet to get rid of the things.

"Take me to the other side of the blood wards," Sirius orders and Kreacher Apparates them outside, on top of a cliff overseeing the ocean.

Sirius looks at the stars. On the western coastline, he decides. Up north.

There's nothing around, for as far as his eyes can see.

He should kill Kreacher. He *has* to. Voldemort can't catch wind that he's alive, that Sirius discovered another Horcrux.

He felt safe with Sirius and Dumbledore knowing he has one, because he had another, hidden away. It makes sense now.

No one, not even Dumbledore, would think he made two. That just isn't done. Impossible. Never even been attempted before.

Who even thinks to make two? *Two?*

That's why he was so brazen as to wear one on his finger, so careless with concealing it-

What if he made three?

Clearly, he's still brazen with the second if he didn't even bother to check if Kreacher died before leaving.

Sirius shivers. *Solve the Kreacher problem first.*

He grips his wand tighter and turns to stare at the elf, who is still bursting into tears occasionally, and whispers the name of a long-dead Black, the potion still running through him, even if much weaker.

I can't do it, he realises. Not when Kreacher's worst memories are about dead Blacks, not when he keeps apologising that 'Kreacher couldn't save Master Orion, Kreacher must punish himself'.

Fuck.

"You realise how dangerous that man is, right?"

Kreacher nods. "Bad mudblood. Evil mudblood. Worse than Bad Master."

"He's not a mudblood," Sirius snaps at him.

"He is not pure," Kreacher argues, even in pain. "Kreacher knows it in his bones. He's *other*. Different. Tainted."

"Whatever. If he finds out you survived, he will wipe out our family-"

Sirius doesn't even get to finish the sentence before Kreacher *flings* himself off the cliff.

"Accio elf!" Sirius yells, and magic snatches Kreacher up before he can crash into the water, brings him back next to Sirius.

"What the fuck!?"

"Kreacher must die!" the elf yells, and Sirius has to hold him to stop him from throwing himself off the cliff again. "Kreacher must die so Kreacher's Blacks can be safe-"

"Stop that! STOP!" Sirius puts all the power he can into the order.

Kreacher freezes.

"You will go to our house in Toulouse. It's abandoned, anyway. No one set foot there since dad got sick. In case someone comes along, you hide yourself from them. You understand me?"

Kreacher agrees.

"Good. Now, fuck off."

Kreacher still stares at him. "Bad Master has to take care of Good little master and Mistress. Who will care for them if Kreacher is -"

"FUCK OFF!" Sirius yells, exasperated and tired, his mind racing.

Kreacher disappears.

Sirius sits on the edge of the cliff, confused and scared, feet dangling over the edge.

The stars are incredibly bright, so far away from any sort of human settlement.

Sirius can count them even in the water, their reflection perfectly visible.

He feels their presence more than ever, the magic that binds them. He's more comfortable with it than ever, too, because Voldemort is teaching him how to control it.

Patiently. Safely.

Sirius feels so safe with him that he now has no issue letting himself be taken over by astral magic, because he knows Voldemort wouldn't let anything happen to him.

"Fuck," he whispers.

It's an awful thing to feel unsafe. Sirius struggled so much with it at sixteen, when his dad died, when he ran away, and he was left without any protection, alone. *Marooned.*

But at least he had a father for the majority of his childhood. He had a family. He never had to worry about his safety as a boy.

How unsafe can one possibly be to feel the need to rip himself apart, not once, but twice, in what must be a desperate attempt to keep himself safe?

How disadvantaged, too, crippled by his muggle upbringing, by poverty- no matter how many books Voldemort reads, there are things one truly understands only if raised by wizards and witches.

Like elves having incredible magic, more potent than wizards.

They are less because they aren't human, because the fae had gone to war with wizard kind, long before, vicious, powerful fuckers that almost wiped wizards out of existence. When they lost, they were enslaved, their magic bound in servitude to wizards. The mighty fae of the old branched into house-elves and goblins, or more simply, the fae that surrendered and was enslaved, and the fae that kept fighting, rebellions upon rebellions, all squashed with effort until the goblins gave up. For the moment, at least.

Any wizards raised by and around house-elves would know they aren't less, magically. Less, *socially*. Less *lawfully*, but never *magically.*

Kreacher could look after Andromeda, Bellatrix, Narcissa, Sirius and Regulus with ease, keep them safe all at once from all sorts of accidental magic, when any wizard or witch would struggle to contain so many chaotic magical children at once.

His mother was left exhausted by Sirius' antics when he was having a bad day, but Kreacher never tired, always vigilant, always knowing, always fast and impossible to trick.

For fuck's sake, house elves can live hundred of years, because their magic is that strong, sustaining them.

Yet Voldemort sees their servitude and bondage as proof of them being weaker. He'd come to their world, see the way wizards treat elves as lesser beings, but without truly *understanding* the nuances. Voldemort probably only saw elves cooking at Hogwarts, cleaning, bowing their heads in the Manors he visited.

He never saw Kreacher throw away unruly guests with just a snap of his fingers, sending Rodolphus flying because he caught him in a room alone with Bella when he was courting her.

He never saw Kreacher *willing* away fires Sirius started as a boy.

So Voldemort sees them as inconsequential, lesser in any way.

And they are, sure, they've become weak-minded over the millennia, but their magic remains as strong as ever. Which is why they aren't allowed freedom.

Father was right, Sirius thinks, glancing at the sky. *An outsider can never truly fit in.* Voldemort, Lily- they can read what they want, they can be great at magic, but they'll never

fit in *culturally*. Not on a deeper level. They can fall into wizarding habits, with time, become accustomed to certain things, but they can't possibly be the *same.*

Which is why Sirius likes them, isn't it? Because they're different. He feels at home with fellow purebloods, but muggle raised people always have a newness to them that Sirius always enjoyed.

He doesn't understand why they can't just leave it at that- why they can't have both old, and new. Why can't all be enjoyed?

He doesn't understand why Lily and other muggleborns feel the need to 'correct' the old, change it into something that better fits whatever muggle nonsense they've been taught.

He never understands why blood purists want to destroy anything that is new, instead of ignoring it if they don't like it, or appreciate it if they like it.

For all that Sirius likes muggle things, for all he's intrigued and entertained by some of Lily's notions, it's not like he'll ever want to replace what he was raised with, like his grandfather feared he would if he spends time around muggleborns.

He just likes all options to be out there, to be indulged as the mood strikes him.

Yet it seems their points of view are so incompatible with each other that they will never settle. It never had; ever since the Inquisition, this has been a problem in all magical societies. Sometimes it boils into war, ever century or so, all over the world, one side banding together to destroy the other, then the war ends, for a while, attempts are made at reconciliation, at 'justice', until the next conflict starts.

Maybe Voldemort will actually be different from other warlords before him. Because while he'll secure a victory for blood purists, he absolutely holds views that never before belonged in old, traditional households.

Maybe he can blend it all together, somehow.

He's certainly the only man to make blood purists work with werewolves and vampires. He made vampires and werewolves work with *each other*. He told Sirius he has giants on his side, too.

He has half-bloods in his army. Half-bloods with muggle names; because there is a difference between half-bloods, too. Those with a wizarding name, raised on the *right* side of the fence, are always allowed more leeway than those raised by muggles with their unfamiliar names.

Yet Voldemort accepts both and has the power to make them all work together if not exactly get along.

No one so far has united all those sides under a single banner.

Of course, he needs some council- honest opinions, not mindless flattery, so he can stop making these *silly* mistakes that would be glaringly obvious to people like Sirius.

Only he doesn't ask for it. If Voldemort had spoken with anyone about Horcruxes before, he'd have learned what Sirius informed him- knowledge about them isn't as obscure and secret as Voldemort thought it to be.

If Voldemort had mentioned he intended to leave an elf to die on its own, in a warded area, any man in his inner council would have pointed out the elf will go back home if not directed otherwise, wards be damned.

But he never tells anyone anything. Even people he obviously trusts, like Bella and Rodolphus.

Yet he tells stuff to Sirius, doesn't he? Things Sirius is sure he never told others. Maybe he never spoke freely with Rodolphus, with anyone, because he unconsciously feared he'd betray his muggle roots if he went too in-depth in certain subjects. And he'd be right to fear that- even as reserved as he is, no one in his inner circle is fooled regarding his blood status. They ignore it, they made an exception for him, but they all *know*.

In any case, with Sirius, Voldemort doesn't have to worry about betraying his muggle upbringing, his muggle father. He doesn't have to hide the fact he hates everyone *equally*, he thinks them all stupid and underneath him, muggleborn and pureblood alike.

Sirius is already aware of it, and he likes Voldemort just as he is.

I still like him, he thinks, *even after this.*

It scares Sirius, and horrifies the part of him that understands the ramifications of these rituals, yet he still likes Voldemort.

He's impressed the man survived the process. Twice.

It only makes him more of a mystery, feeds Sirius' obsession with him.

(-)

"Are you happy?" Voldemort asks him over dinner. "Now that the elf is gone?"

"Very," Sirius says, holding his gaze. "Mum thew a fit, though."

That pleases Voldemort; he's petty like that- he can't cause any significant harm to Sirius' mother, so he takes what he can.

His mother really was distraught. Sirius had to heal the scratches on his face left by her wedding ring when she slapped him.

Regulus was also upset, even if he understood when Sirius explained the dark lord demanded a trusted elf, and Sirius volunteered Kreacher.

"He brought honour to our House," Regulus sniffled, close to crying.

It prompted their mother to slap him, too, which was a first. She had never before hit Regulus.

"Honour? Honour? Dying for a-" But she stops herself just in time.

"For a what?" Regulus asks, and Sirius covets that kind of innocence, for a time when he was as clueless as Regulus about Voldemort.

"For someone that's not a Black," she rectifies, mindful even in her rage. "I don't even have Kreacher's head to mount on the wall, like he wanted! He wanted to be with his parents!" she laments.

"Mother, he is the dark lord," Regulus says. "He is above even us."

That gets him another slap, and Sirius puts himself between them.

Then he turns around and yells at Regulus that no one is above Blacks, and to never say something so sacrilegious, especially in their house.

"I'm sure that's nothing new. I remember she threw fits over everything, back at Hogwarts." A strange expression crosses over his features. "Rodolphus told me Bella cried when she heard the elf was dead. Your family really was attached to that thing."

"More than they are to me" Sirius quips. "What is this?" he asks, nodding at his food. "I think it's my favourite so far."

Voldemort talks about food, while Sirius makes sure his fingers don't tremble around the fork after lying to Voldemort to his face and getting away with it.

(-)

Winter came with a vengeance around Voldemort's small home, lost in the wilderness of the north. The flakes are huge, gathered around the windows, getting on top of each other as if attempting to spy inside the house; as if they, too, like to watch Voldemort in his habitat.

He's most at ease when he's behind his desk, Sirius observed. Without his robe, the sleeves of his shirt rolled over, a few buttons undone on the collar. His hair, always in a braid, hangs over his shoulder.

He reads as Sirius plays on his guitar; he reads, and reads, and sometimes he lifts his eyes and casts his gaze out the window, but Sirius rather thinks he's looking at something that doesn't exist; perhaps he's looking into the past, or the future. Whatever he's seeing, it pleases him; his gaze is focused in those moments, but satisfaction curls the side of his mouth.

He is an extraordinary man, someone that exudes quiet authority, confidence and power even when he's sipping his tea and staring into space, long fingers curled around a muggle book.

Sirius is in awe of him, and he's never been in awe of anything. Not since he was a child.

His forearm flexes when he reaches for his teacup, blueish veins spreading like vines over its length. Scars disrupt their path, here and there.

He has many of them- small, or large, barely noticeable or gruesome. Sirius knows there's one of his upper back left thigh, a reminder of an injury so severe it must have almost taken his leg off completely. It's still red and angry, Sirius fancies sometimes he can see the blood in the cut; but it couldn't have been a recent injury. No, no one can injure Voldemort like that these days. It must have happened a long, long time ago, on those travels he sometimes speaks of. Yet his body just gave up on trying to heal it, because too much damage had been done.

In a hidden room, in Grimmauld, Sirius read about Horcruxes. More than was ever said about them in the book Voldemort managed to obtain from Hogwarts' library. It was the first time Sirius entered that room; he never could before, because he wasn't Grimmauld's owner, but he knew it was there. Filled with books so old, they were treated with more care than children were treated in their family.

A particular parchment spoke of a way to achieve immortality.

It took Sirius hours to find it, head already throbbing with glancing over Latin and Brythonic texts.

He didn't even bother trying to understand the instruction for the ritual. Why would he? He doesn't intend to make one, and it seemed impossibly complicated anyway. So Sirius did himself a favour and skipped it. The word Horcrux wasn't mentioned anywhere- probably wasn't invented yet.

It said one can seal a part of their magic in a container, separate it from one's body. Magic, not soul.

Souls probably weren't invented either at the time the parchment was written. Or at least not the concept they have of it today.

You ripped away pieces of your magic, Sirius thinks. It's sad to think about. Terrifying, too. How much stronger would Voldemort have been if he'd left himself intact?

You made yourself less than you were supposed to be, Sirius thinks.

What he read in Grimmauld's library the other day plagues him, refuses to give him peace.

Warnings that ripping away a part of one's magic will affect the body and the mind. Wizards need their magic like they need air and blood and water. If they don't have enough, things start to fall apart, the parchment said.

The body decays without complex wards and runes to stave it off. The eyes turn red, because they don't produce pigment anymore, and in the absence of colour, the light reflects back from the iris, making it appear red. One turns cold, without the possibility of regulating their own body heat. Nothing functions properly anymore. And the mind-

Bad humours of the mind, the text warned.

Yet Voldemort looks so very sane, doesn't he? So put together, and patient and strategic.

Voldemort is lucky Sirius isn't one to hold things sacred. One's magic is sacred for any wizard; or wizards of the old ways, at least. Traditional ones. It's why they are so adamantly against mixing with muggles. Blood purists believe such a union will weaken magic in the progeny.

A true, proper blood purist would be horrified about Horcruxes. The way Sirius' father was.

If Regulus would ever learn what Voldemort did to himself, to his own magic, his little brother will instantly brand him a heretic. He would go from adoring Voldemort to seeing him as a traitor.

"What do you want?" Voldemort asks him, startling Sirius out of his thoughts, those mesmerising eyes trained on him. "What is it that you most desire?"

If only Voldemort knew how many people had asked him that question over the years. If only he knew how long Sirius has been unable to answer. Even saying 'I don't know' would be a lie, because Sirius knows that he wants... something. It's just something vast and unknowable, something tantalising and beyond his reach. He could never put it into words.

He says nothing, and Voldemort hums to himself, returning to his book.

(-)

"No," she says, arms crossed, nose in the air, a hateful expression on her face. "He won't do."

Dobby quivers from head to feet, his ears flopping back and forth, unable to meet anyone's eyes.

Regulus regards Dobby with kindness; he does like the weird little thing; Dobby was always kind to them when they were young and got lost in Malfoy Manor.

"He's alright. But he can't replace Kreacher."

Oh, for fuck' sake.

"I know," Sirius says, patient. "But you need an elf-"

"I don't need anything," his mother snaps.

"Oh, yeah? You'll clean all fourteen rooms by yourself?" Sirius mocks. "You'll cook? Do you want to poison Regul-"

She spits on him and leaves.

Sirius sighs, wipes the spit off his face with the sleeve of his robe.

"You'll be fine," he tells Dobby. "I know she seems mean, but she's usually kind to elves. You'll be treated well here, Dobby."

Certainly better than how Lucius treated him.

Sirius paid an arm and a leg for Dobby. It's the first time he wrote a check to the goblins, directing them to move the gold from the Black vault to the Malfoy one. Who was only too happy to part with the disobedient creature, as he calls Dobby, especially for that much gold. He could buy two other elves with it.

Sirius always knew his father left him everything, but still, he felt a jolt of apprehension before the goblins approved the transaction. But now there it is, final, irrefutable proof that, indeed, Sirius owns the vault. He sent James what he owed him, too, since he was at it. It never sat right with him to use James' gold, even if James could spare it.

His mother and Regulus were always allowed to take gold out of the vault, but for transactions so ridiculously large, only the owner can approve it.

Even if he knew his father left him everything, it still felt good to have confirmation.

And it's really good to be rich again. Granted, it's not like he ever lacked for anything, between Alphard and James, but still...

The ritual is already done, Dobby's apron white and pristine, with the Black family motto and sigil in a corner.

It is a necessity for the bonding. The elf swears obeisance, and the master needs to bind him with clothes.

"Welcome home, Dobby," Regulus sighs. "Just give mother time to get used to you, yes? She misses Kreacher."

"Dobby is sorry for Kreacher. He was a loyal elf." And then, muttering. "Very scary, too."

Regulus smiles now, seeing the elf muttering under his breath.

Sirius knew Dobby would be the right choice, hence why he allowed Lucius to rip him off. Blacks aren't used to normal, hyper-obedient elves. They are used to Kreacher's sassy nature. To say nothing of Kreacher's great aunt, who, *thankfully*, moved out of Grimmauld with his grandfather. Tesuth was somehow even nastier than Kreacher, but Blacks that aren't Sirius prefer it that way.

Blacks also don't give revolting short and stupid names to their elves.

"Do you think we can rename him?" Regulus wonders, staring down at Dobby.

"Let him settle in, first. He's nervous enough as it is, you don't want him bashing his head on the wall because you called him by a new name, and he didn't realise he should answer to it."

Regulus sighs again. "Fine. Come along, Dobby, I'll show you around, instruct you on how we like things around here. You really should stop trembling, there's no need for that. Now, the most important thing to remember is to never let Mother cook. Once in a while, for whatever reason, she gets it in her head to mess around in the kitchen, but that never ends well. Don't even let her cut a slice of bread; knowing her, she'd find a way to mess it up."

"How is Dobby supposed to stop her?" Dobby asks, terrified.

"Oh, just snatch whatever she is holding out of her hands and send her away."

Dobby looks ready to faint. And, after a few more steps, once in view of the staircase, he sees the mounted house-elf heads on the wall and actually faints.

Sirius amuses himself watching his brother reviving Dobby and then trying to explain beheading elves is an act of *appreciation and love*. "My ancestors simply didn't want to part with their elves, so they kept the heads to remember them by. See, this right here is Kreacher's mother. It seemed to comfort Kreacher to see her on the wall whenever he wanted." Regulus smiles encouragingly.

And we wonder why people call us crazy, Sirius thinks.

Yet Dobby has stopped paying attention to the heads and seems very focused on the way Regulus holds his shoulder gently. His ears perk up, the longer Regulus smiles at him, even if he's talking about beheaded elves.

(-)

Sirius is distressingly sober. At least for his standards. He had a few glasses of firewhsikey, but certainly not enough. Not enough for *this.*

Yet when Voldemort tries to turn them around, sure fingers digging into the nape of Sirius' neck and on his shoulder...he lets it happen.

It has something to do with the locket Horcrux. Somehow. He's not sure. It should have made Sirius run far, far away. It should have made him see Voldemort as even more of a monster.

As it is, it makes him think of Voldemort as *lonely*. And he is lonely, he always knew that, yet after he found the locket, Sirius often thinks how *terribly* lonely he must be. He must have always been.

In a strange way, an action as monstrous as ripping his soul twice, only humanised Voldemort in his eyes.

He can make mistakes. He's vulnerable, like the rest of us. He's not as confident as he makes it seem. He has fears, too.

No one filled with confidence does that shit twice, after all.

And it's not that horrible, is it? At least so far. It's even comfortable when he lays on his back on the mattress.

What is not exactly comfortable is Voldemort looming above him.

He might be human, he might make mistakes, but he is terrifying. Especially when he looks as pleased as he does right then.

Sirius closes his eyes, like a child. But he quickly opens them when he realises not seeing makes everything more *intense.*

He reaches up, tightens his fingers in Voldemort's already messy braid, pulling him down forcefully and kissing him just as forcefully.

However, the fucker takes control of the kiss, too, which has never happened before.

Apparently is not enough Sirius is already giving in, he must let Voldemort dictate-

His thoughts scatter because the kiss is very nice.

Different. Calmer then when Sirius is in charge.

Almost *gentle.*

It's been - he can't remember the last time someone was gentle with him.

Well, the girls he fucks are gentle, but they have no power over Sirius, anyway. It's how they are.

Voldemort does have power over Sirius and in *general*, so him being gentle is a choice.

Sirius is already uncomfortable, in unfamiliar territory, and they've only just started.

Well, they're already naked, but that's about all.

He doesn't like it. Or, maybe he likes the slow way he's being kissed, but he just doesn't know what to do with it.

He turns his head away, and breathes in. *Oh, maybe that was the problem,* he thinks, as sweet air fills his lungs. He forgot to breathe in the last minute.

Voldemort is unaware, or more likely unconcerned with Sirius' quiet freak out.

He latches on to Sirius' neck, now.

He does that often, though. He always goes for the neck when they're fucking.

It wouldn't be the first time Sirius has to conceal light marks in that area.

Yet now he feels more vulnerable than ever; it's one thing for Voldemort to mouth at his throat when Sirius is above him, and quite another when Sirius is laid on his back like a *sacrifice.*

Stop it. It's the same. Like he pointed out so smugly, you're always defenceless around him, no matter what positions you fuck in.

Even so, Sirius can ignore that truth when he doesn't feel he's at Voldemort's mercy.

You've been on your back before, his mind suggests. Sometimes, Marlene got it in her head to ride him, even if it was rare, and Sirius let her and he didn't feel vulnerable or less in control, did he?

Voldemort isn't Marlene, though.

Ah, great, when did that happen? Sirius wonders when he notices his legs are spread.

He can't remember doing it, but he must have done it. Probably to make room for Voldemort to settle between them.

He closes his eyes again, throws a hand over his face, for good measure.

Voldemort pays him no mind, busy with kissing along Sirius' chest. Licking, too. Some nips, here and there.

Sirius is frozen, unmoving. He isn't sure what pins him down so decisively.

Voldemort keeps his weight- light as it is- off Sirius, supporting himself on one long arm.

It is possible it's the sensation spreading through him that keep Sirius in place. His skin is on fire. He had no idea he had many sensitive places, all around. Like on his sternum- who would have guessed a kiss there would leave him breathless, would send sparks of pleasure straight to his cock.

Men aren't sensitive, a voice sneers in his head.

Shut up, Sirius sneers back. Begs, more likely. He just wants everyone to shut up.

He knows it's all him, of course, that there's no one else in his head, but sometimes it feels as if he carries all his ancestors around, echoes of the past, going with Sirius through life, scolding him, advising him, judging him and finding him lacking.

He just wants them to leave him alone. At least for now.

By the time Voldemort's teeth close lightly on the very sensitive skin around his hipbone, Sirius is ready to jump out of his skin.

But the voices are quiet because it looks- it seems as if- where is Voldemort heading, exactly?

There's only one place he can go from there, and Sirius wants it so much, so very, very much that he forgets Blacks shouldn't get fucked.

The next time Sirius feels hot breath and cool lips, they're on one of his thighs. He can't tell which one, he doesn't know right from left anymore.

Upper thigh. Upper inner thigh. So close to where Sirius wants him.

And, oh, how *sensitive* Sirius is there.

He has to bite his tongue very hard in order to keep quiet.

Calm, he tells himself. *Calm.*

But Sirius is never calm, so he doubts he'll manage it now.

He realises he's spreading his legs wider, but he can't stop himself.

And then Voldemort moves to the other thigh, but as his head changes directions, Sirius can feel his breath over his cock, and a sound escapes him before Sirius cuts it off, biting his lip this time.

Unlike Sirius, Voldemort is a very patient man. He spends a long time alternating between Sirius' thighs, so much that Sirius now only wants him to fucking get to it already, no other thought in his head because there's no more room there. *Need* occupies his whole brain.

Well, there must be something else left besides need, because Sirius thinks 'if he's waiting for me to 'ask nicely', he'll be waiting forever'.

Sirius is already giving him what he wants, he won't beg for it, too. Different things, aren't they? Letting someone fuck you and begging for it. Surely, there's a distinction.

Thankfully, he doesn't have to beg.

Long, sure fingers wrap around his cock, and very soon after that-

Sirius breathes in, lets his hand drop from his face, and he opens his eyes because he *has* to see this.

Voldemort looks no less imposing with a cock in his mouth. Truly, somehow he looks even more impressive.

It's bloody fantastic.

He can go ahead and die, because nothing he'll experience in this life will ever top this: having his prick in the dark lord's mouth.

Obviously, Sirius had his cock sucked by more practiced and skilled people, but it doesn't matter. They weren't *Voldemort.*

Who takes his bloody time, like he had with the rest of Sirius; slowly, curiously, exploratory. Diligent.

Even if Sirius is doing his best not to make needy, pleasured-filled sounds, his body must give away some of his reactions- perhaps the way he *fucking twitches*- because Voldemort immediately learns when he's doing something Sirius particularly enjoys, and makes sure to repeat it.

Now Sirius' brain is occupied with stopping himself from coming. Luckily, he can at least control that, and he doesn't embarrass himself.

It helps that Voldemort is so *slow*. It's frustrating, the pleasure building and building slowly, but Sirius is less likely to come undone at this pace.

And the Horcrux- in direct contact with Sirius' prick...it will never fail to be thrilling.

It's cold, and it stays cold, unlike Voldemort's skin, which warms up a bit after prolonged, intimate contact with Sirius'.

The Horcrux is ice, providing a wonderful contrast of sensations. And it's *alive*. Magic thrumming inside it. Dark magic, powerful, seductive and deadly.

Right there, on Sirius' cock, along with slender, long fingers and a hot mouth; with that witty tongue, circling around and under Sirius' cockhead.

Nothing ever will be as good. He's certain of it.

Will he let me come in his mouth? That, possibly, might be as good.

Sirius feels like a god. Like the God, the way muggles have him. God of Gods. King of Kings.

Of course, Voldemort had to ruin it, to remind Sirius he's not there to be worshiped, but to get fucked, and a long finger finds its way to where Sirius feared, but accepted it will go.

He tenses, he can't help it, but he decided he'll do it, so he's committed to it. He forgets why he decided on it, distracted by the mouth on his cock. It's fine, it also serves to distract Sirius a bit from the finger that is now circling around his hole.

Sirius closes his eyes again. He's already tense, can't get any tenser, but he flinches when lubricant is there out of nowhere. Of course, Voldemort doesn't need a wand to summon it.

Probably neither does Sirius, but because Voldemort is paranoid, he always makes Sirius use his yew wand when they need lubricant, and Sirius really likes holding that wand.

Voldemort takes him deeper inside his mouth, still keeping his slow pace. Deeper and deeper.

Sirius breathes again, focuses on it, attempting to ignore anything else.

And when Voldemort's tongue prods at the tip of Sirius' cock, he can't help but moan, lift his hips quite involuntary-

Before he knows it, the finger is inside him, but Sirius refuses to pay it any mind.

Whatever. It doesn't hurt, so it's easy to ignore.

Won't be as easy to ignore his cock, a voice returns to torment him. *Especially since he can't suck you off at the same time.*

Whatever!

Sirius will only do this once, and then he won't think about it anymore.

What if I like it?

Somehow, the thought is even more uncomfortable than the idea he would hate it.

Voldemort's tongue swirls again, and really, did the man practice on something? A banana? A cucumber? How is he so good at this, so fast?

His finger pushes deeper inside Sirius.

If I like it, Sirius decides, so tired to fight with himself, *it only means I like sex, and that's all there is to it.*

Eyes still closed, he reaches out, grabs Voldemort's hair, and encourages him to go even deeper.

He does, and Sirius gets a thrill out of it, not just physically, but knowing he's literally pushing Voldemort's head down his prick.

He does take care not to push too hard, though.

The second finger is a tad harder to ignore. Not so much discomfort, per say, just- it's not as easy to dismiss the fullness he experiences.

Not as awful as he expected, in any case. He's still mostly concerned with his throbbing cock.

I am going to come in his mouth, Sirius decides. Fuck it, Voldemort came in his mouth, after all.

He remembers Voldemort licking Sirius' come off the Horcrux and he moans again.

It gets impossible to ignore the fingers when they stumble over what Sirius assumes is his prostate.

Everything comes to a halt. He gasps. He can't help it. He never thought his body could produce such reactions. The pleasure is like lightning, zapping through him, intense, up his spine, down his legs, he can even feel it in his fucking toes.

Oh, he thinks, surprised, when it passes. *Oh.*

And then, then he thinks, *'Again. Do it again.'* He almost says it, because it was that good. *Incredibly* good.

Thankfully, he didn't need to say it. Surely it was impossible for Voldemort to miss his reaction, what with how Sirius must have jerked all over.

What with the moans.

So he does it again. As careful as always.

Slow. So slow.

Sirius is losing the little patience he has left. It feels like he's been hard for a long time, and he just wants a release from all the build-up.

But there's no making Voldemort hurry, even if he picks up the pace a little.

I can work with this, Sirius thinks, panting. It's not as fast as he needs, but he can come, he's sure. If he keeps it up even like that he can-

He's almost *there* when Voldemort slows down again.

For fuck's sake!

He growls, hoping to communicate what he's feeling. Hoping Voldemort understands. Sirius himself isn't sure he understands everything that he's feeling, but Voldemort's smarter, so here's to hoping.

The second time Voldemort loses his rhythm, Sirius whines. Embarrassing, but he's past caring.

Voldemort is killing him. With sex! He never thought this is how he'd die when he started interacting with the vicious dark lord, but he's going to die if he's pulled back from the brink right as he's about to come.

It's fucking torture. Delicious torture, to be sure, but still.

I hope this isn't how he tortures his Death Eaters, Sirius thinks absurdly. He's always been suspicious about all those pesky rumours he still doesn't want to believe, Voldemort losing his mind and turning on his own men, but now he can't deny Voldemort is good at torture.

He probably doesn't understand, Sirius thinks, as Voldemort finds his pace once more.

Man was a virgin; he probably just can't tell what the fuck he's doing to me.

So, Sirius forces his mouth to open and use words.

"Close," he says, voice horse. "So close."

He hopes that will encourage Voldemort to keep what he's doing, *exactly* like he's doing it.

So when he slows down again, Sirius knows this is on purpose.

Azkaban. Voldemort should be carted off to Azkaban, not for his many crimes, but for what he's doing to Sirius. This should be illegal.

Sirius opens his eyes again, so he can glare at Voldemort.

Who spares a second to meet Sirius' gaze, lips still wrapped around his cock.

He doesn't seem to be intimidated by Sirius' scowl. In fact, if a man could smile with a cock in his mouth, Voldemort would be smiling.

Isn't he tired? Sirius thinks because his jaw gets sore when he sucks Voldemort off.

And they've been at it for a long time. *Way* too long.

Sirius pushes himself on his elbows to better glare at Voldemort, but Voldemort returns his attention to driving Sirius insane.

Fingers dragging over his prostrate, tongue swirling around his cock; he moves his now free hand to rest on Sirius' abdomen, which is hard as a rock.

Sirius can see all of his tense muscles jumping around, gleaming with sweat in the candlelight. He can see how flushed he is, all over his chest.

He can't imagine how red his face must be.

With his complexion, Sirius reddens easily. Luckily, not many things make him blush, so he doesn't, but this isn't blushing. This is just too much, he's *overheating*, he can hear how laboured his breath is.

If Voldemort thinks Sirius will just lie there and take this, he's dead wrong.

Isn't that what you've been doing, though? All laid out, eyes closed, as if you're the blushing virgin?

Well, no more.

He grabs Voldemort's hair again, firmly, and pulls him up until only the tip of Sirius' cock is in his mouth.

He grabs his cock with the other hand, and he groans in relief when he can control the pace, go as fast as he likes.

He comes in mere seconds. It still feels like dying and going to some sort of heavenly place, but Sirius won't close his eyes again because he can't miss this image.

It feels like he is finally marking Voldemort, too, leaving a claim on him. A primal claim, older and more intimate than a stupid tattoo.

He sees Voldemort's Adam apple moving as he *swallows*, and Sirius swears he's coming again before the first orgasm is even over.

When he's finally done, when he milks every last drop, Sirius lets go of his softening cock and Voldemort's hair, and he collapses back on the bed, drained. Quite literally.

Fuck, that was the best orgasm ever. He can't even call it an orgasm. It's too small of a word to describe the bliss Sirius felt- *still* feels, aftershocks making him twitch. It's more like a spiritual experience, like he'd partaken in some powerful ancient ritual.

It also leaves him as exhausted as a magical ritual. If he closes his eyes, he'll fall right asleep, he's sure.

But he can't close his eyes because Voldemort straightens his back and raises to his impressive height between Sirius' legs.

He's a very tall man, but he's so thin he usually doesn't strike Sirius as-

as whatever he is now. He seems way bigger, standing on his knees between Sirius' spread legs, his cock proud and heavy, threatening almost.

Oh, right, Sirius remembers why they're there, and apprehension fills him.

I shouldn't have come, he thinks. This would have been easier if Sirius was aroused. He made the decision to let Voldemort fuck him when he was, indeed, aroused, but now-

Now he's-

Get over it. Can't take him long, not after waiting so much. You can stand it.

He was numb, body made of clay after that amazing orgasm, but now he's getting feeling back, and he can feel his *arse*. It's not sore, not exactly, but it's *wet* and different than it usually is. Sirius is never aware of his arse, after all, but he's aware now.

He tenses up again, all over, even if his body just begs him to relax and go to sleep.

He stares up at Voldemort, can't look away, and Voldemort meets his eyes, a *feral* look in all that red.

He spreads Sirius' legs wider, scoots closer, and takes his cock in his hand.

And just like that, he's relegated to God position in Sirius' eyes once more, something far, far away, light years apart from mere mortals. Ethereal and awe-inspiring.

Especially with the way he's touching himself. Sirius has never seen him do it, and it leaves him breathless to witness it.

He comes fast, too. His head bows a little, as if it pains him to do it, but his back is still straight as a rod, something incredibly stoic about him.

Warm come pools on Sirius' abdomen, and in the next second, Voldemort moves, and he collapses beside Sirius, who not only breathes in relief that he didn't have to go through with getting fucked, but he knows he has new wanking material to replace anything else. He knows he'll be thinking of Voldemort coming like that, touching himself every time his cock is hard.

Sirius makes a content noise, and he relaxes back into that post-coital bliss now that there's no threat looming.

He's always a threat, something whispers, but Sirius is far too exhausted to care.

He closes his eyes, he sinks into the bed and goes right to sleep. The last thing he feels is a touch on his shoulder, feather-light, the ghost of a finger trailing up.

(-)

He wakes in almost complete darkness, the moonlight sneaking through the half-closed curtains enough to let Sirius know he's in Voldemort's bed.

Running water woke him, and he notices a tendril of light coming from, no doubt, a candle in the bathroom.

Sirius stretches, runs a hand down his chest. Voldemort must have cast a cleaning charm on him, because he feels clean, but it seems it didn't suffice for Voldemort, who's most likely taking a bath.

There's a blanket around Sirius, and he's struck by an image of Voldemort placing it over him.

It wouldn't be the first time he cares for Sirius while he's unconscious.

He takes care of me, Sirius thinks, closing his eyes again, a warmth in his limbs that has nothing to do with the blanket.

He spotted his wand and a glass of water on the nightstand, too.

Voldemort is always so attentive to everything Sirius might need.

I can't do this anymore, Sirius knows, with crystal clear clarity. He lives his life in anger, confusion and doubt, but now everything is *clear.*

He can't spy on Voldemort. Not that he's been doing a very good job at it, anyway, but he can't even pretend anymore.

Just the thought of having to see Dumbledore again, pretending Sirius is working to destroy Voldemort, telling Dumbledore even a smidgen of information that could lead to his downfall- It makes Sirius feel *disgusting.*

It's no longer about choosing between Bella or James, Regulus or Lily. No longer about right and wrong, though, if he's honest, it was never about that.

If Sirius were to betray Voldemort, he wouldn't just be betraying the dark lord. He'd be betraying the man that cooks for him, that covers him with blankets, that is so, so patient with Sirius.

'I like the closeness of it', Voldemort's words ring into his head. He allows Sirius close, and Sirius simply cannot picture betraying that.

He can't stick a knife in his back, in the back of someone that was once a lonely orphan finding his gambling partner, perhaps the only man that ever paid attention to little Tom, dead and ignored on the harsh London streets.

I'm done with the Order, Sirius thinks, and he can feel a smile spreading on his lips. He feels a tremendous weight lifting.

It almost makes him weep, it's so *good*. Almost as good as that orgasm from hours before.

Free. I'm free.

I know the way, now. I can see it.

Sirius sees the future. He knows where he wants to be. He turns, incredibly relieved, and he buries his nose in a pillow that smells like Voldemort.

Like power, safety and home, the way Voldemort always smelled.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning: brief mention of stillbirth and miscarriage.

Once again, thank you for your incredible patience waiting for this chapter. As always, I would love to hear your thoughts on this chapter, if you can take the time to share them with me.

Thank you for reading! ❤️

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He never liked disappointing Dumbledore. Sirius couldn't care less about what most people thought of him, but Dumbledore was one of the few whose approval Sirius sought.

That never stopped him from misbehaving, certainly. After all, Sirius never wanted to disappoint his parents, either, but it inevitably happened.

It was easier to snarl back at Dumbledore that day, in the very same office, when the Snape thing happened- it was easier to sneer and hide behind his arrogance than apologise, admit he fucked up and meet that blue, all knowing gaze.

"Has something happened?" Dumbledore asks, seated in his chair, old wrinkled hands stapled together in his lap.

Sirius doesn't feel at all uncomfortable; he thought he would, but he doesn't. He doesn't care what Dumbledore thinks anymore.

Is this the power of conviction? It must be; for the first time in so very long, Sirius knows what he wants, so it's as simple as breathing to stand by his choice.

"I won't spy for you anymore."

At first, he thought to say 'I can't spy for you' but- Sirius can, he just doesn't *want* to.

His father never used words like 'can't', after all. Sirius noticed in all those meetings he was dragged to. Blacks can do anything, but they'll only do what they please.

Dumbledore's face doesn't betray anything- no disappointment, no surprise, no confusion.

"Why?" is all he asks, voice as even as ever.

"It's not in my best interest." After a brief pause, he adds. "Not in my family's interest."

Dumbledore considers him in silence for some seconds.

"It isn't in your family's interest to side with Voldemort, either. At least, so far, your grandfather and father kept that stance since the war started." Dumbledore places his elbows on the desk. "How are you going to tell Voldemort you can't spy for him? I believe you won't find him as understanding as I am."

His tone shifted, became cold, as cold as it was when he used to deign to speak to seventh year Slytherins that called muggleborns 'mudbloods'.

His tone makes it obvious Dumbledore knows that Sirius chose a side, and it's not a neutral one.

To be honest, Sirius would rather say it out loud. He isn't ashamed of his choice. He'd rather tell Dumbledore he picked Voldemort and he's happy with his decision. But that's a boy's reaction, rash and impulsive.

Appearances must be kept, even when they don't fool anyone.

"My grandfather is a powerful man, with a lot of influence. He chose to remain neutral, but if Voldemort were to kill one of his family members, he might change his mind. No one wants the Blacks as enemies. Not even Voldemort. I don't need to fear any repercussions."

"I was under the impression your grandfather disowned you."

"Because I followed you. But since that won't be the case anymore…" Sirius trails off.

"You were never one to want to save yourself- to seek protection. I have trouble imagining you begging Arcturus for help."

"You flatter me; perhaps you thought me braver than I truly am."

"You'll regret this, Sirius," Dumbledore says, and it's not a threat, not really. Dumbledore even sounds sad. "Whatever promises Voldemort made you, he will not keep them. Whatever you think he can give you, you will not receive."

Sirius stands. "I could have said nothing," he points out, softly.

I could have turned against you, remained at your side. Spied on you, and with dedication this time. Sirius could have destroyed the Order, easily.

"But I respect you, so I extended you this curtsy-"

"You wouldn't lie to me, if you respect me." Dumbledore stands as well, eyes made of steel.

Sirius shrugs.

Phineas Nigellus is watching him with interest, unblinking from his frame.

Sirius still cares about his opinion, even if he stopped caring about Dumbledore's.

How idiotic. To care what a long dead man would think of him, one that he never met, simply because they have the same ancestors.

"I have no ill-will towards you," Sirius tells Dumbledore. It's true, in a way. In a twisted way, Sirius doesn't personally wish Dumbledore any harm.

Though harm must come to him, in the end.

He leaves, and he feels a profound sense of relief when he closes the door behind him, for the last time.

He knows he will never be welcomed at Hogwarts, for as long as Dumbledore rules it.

(-)

James is harder- far, far harder. And he must act fast, before Dumbledore gets to him, so Sirius Apparates to Godric's Hollow' as soon as he reaches Hogsmeade.

He waits around as Padfoot, hidden in a neighbour's garden, knowing Lily always goes to have tea with Bathilda Bagshot in the morning, if she's up to it.

Indeed, he only needs to wait some half an hour before Lily leaves the house, heads further down the street.

He turns back into a man, breathes deeply a few times, and heads for the house.

Sirius starts with saying how awful it was to have to play Death Eater, how he had to do terrible things that weight heavily on his shoulders. It's mostly a lie, but also not- Parkinson still visits his nightmares.

Sometimes, his father is there, siding with Parkinson, giving Sirius such a venomous look that he wakes up in a cold sweat.

"I knew you needed to get out of there," James says, softly. "I could see the effect it had on you, how angry and…I could see the influence of- You were losing yourself."

Sirius tells James Dumbledore asked him to kill Rodolphus, that he asked Sirius to practically commit suicide.

"He wanted me to poison him, but as soon as Rodolphus dropped dead, I'd have been a dead man, too. I'd have never left that Manor alive," Sirius says. "He doesn't care about my life, he would have traded it so easily for Rodolphus'. And it's not just me, either- Bella would have been there. She'd have tried to defend me, and she'd have gone down with me. She suffers enough as it is, she just had a miscarriage, she's married to a monster, I can't have her die just so we can get rid of one of Voldemort's men. It's too high a price to pay."

At first, James has problems believing Dumbledore would ask for someone to die.

And he wouldn't, usually. Dumbledore would only ask that of Sirius, perhaps Moody, because he knows they are already killers, he knows they aren't innocents with flowers and peace in their hearts, like most Order members.

"You can ask him if you don't believe me," Sirius says, but he knows James will never ask.

As the minutes pass, James' shock fades away and his loyalty to his friend will trump everything. James would never doubt Sirius.

Lily will, though. When James will tell her everything, Lily will want to ask Dumbledore, and Dumbledore won't lie. He'll admit to it. But he'll also tell Lily that he's convinced Sirius didn't just leave the Order, but joined Voldemort.

Lily might trust Dumbledore on it. James will trust Sirius. It's a matter of which one will convince the other.

"So, what do we do?" James asks, his jaws setting in that determined way of his.

"*We* don't have to do anything. But I can't follow Dumbledore anymore."

"But what will you do with Voldemort?"

Sirius gives him the same story- he's a Black, he should be protected as long as he renounces Dumbledore.

James was always quick to jump into action, always so adaptable.

"I'll join the Aurors, then," he says. "I can fight Voldemort that way."

"You don't have to abandon Dumbledore," Sirius offers, though, of course, he knew James would.

"Are you kidding me? You think I'd stand in a room and take guidance from a man that was so willing to throw your life away? *No*. No, I'll just join the Aurors, like I should have done, anyway. I mean, we could both-"

Sirius rolls the sleeve of his robe. The snake moves slowly, languidly, crawls through the skull's eye socket, and back out the other side, embracing it, close, so close.

Sirius almost can't look away, a shiver going down his back-a *thrill*, an intense desire to see Voldemort, touch him, climb around him like the snake curls around the skull- but he forces himself to watch James. "Yeah, I'm afraid I won't be welcomed by the Aurors with this on my arm."

"Fuck," James hisses. "Fuck. I never wanted you to spy! I told you, I told Dumbledore this won't end well for you, and-"

"He doesn't care about me. He never did."

"How are you so calm about this? I wanna crack some heads, and I am not blessed with the Black temper."

"I'm just used to it, James. Besides you, Remus, Peter and Lily, no one ever cared for me in the Order. They'd probably breathe in relief if I kick it. One less headache for them."

“Even more reason to join the Aurors,” James says. “One day, you will be discovered with that shit on your arm, and I can- I mean, if I’ll be well respected with the Aurors and the Ministry, then I can speak for you, explain that-”

“I’ll be fine. They can’t throw me in Azkaban for a tattoo; they’ll just give me a headache for a while. There’s no proof I ever committed a crime at Voldemort’s behest. But certainly they won’t let me join the Aurors with a Dark Mark.”

James keeps trying finding solutions, he paces around the living room, running his hands through his hair so much, it’s sticking up worse than ever.

“You should wait, though,” Sirius suggests, eventually. “To join the Aurors, I mean. What with Lily pregnant, you should stay home for now. Until the baby is here, at least.”

“Yeah, of course,” James agrees, with a sigh. “I was already declining order missions, too. It’s hard to focus on anything when I know she’s home, alone and vulnerable. I just feel so useless, you know? Not doing anything?”

It’s *perfect*. The baby will keep both James and Lily away from the war, at least for a year or so. Absolutely perfect, because nothing else would have stopped them from fighting.

“It’s what you should do. Look after your wife and child. You have to first protect them, and only after that you can focus on the entire fucking country. For now, let’s worry about Lily and the baby, and we’ll see what we can do about Voldemort, after. We’re just some kids, anyway, not like we’d make much of a difference. Dumbledore and the Ministry can carry on, they won’t all die without us there, that’s ridiculous.”

“You should move in with us,” James says. “I- I don’t trust you can just quit Voldemort and- what if he does come after you? You shouldn’t live alone-”

“James.” Sirius grabs his shoulder. “You know what my family name means. It’s just us here, alright? No need to pretend. In a fair world, it wouldn’t matter, but we didn’t grow up in that world, and we’re not living in it. We’re living in the one where my grandfather has enough influence to keep even Voldemort away from me. You know this- We both ignore it, but…it doesn’t make it less true. I have that privilege. I always did.”

James knows. He bites his lip, looks away. He sighs. But Sirius won’t let him ignore the fact that he’s a Black anymore.

“And you’re sure Mr Black would defend you? I mean, I know you said you’ve been seeing your mum again, and…but you’re about to be part of my family, you’ll be tied to my kid, who will be….*you know*.”

“Come on, you’re a Potter. You know dad liked you, you were always welcomed in my house.” Well, his father didn’t exactly *like* James, but he was the most comfortable with him out of all of Sirius’ friends. James was from an old, wealthy pure blood stock, no matter how many blood traitors he had in his family tree. “Your kid will be a half-blood with a Potter name. And that name holds some respect still. It’s not just a random half-blood I’ll be taking under my protection- that’s how grandfather will think, anyway.”

James sighs again. He sits, rubs a hand over his face. “Is it bad?” he asks quietly, *guiltily*. “Is it bad that I thought about that, too? That I told myself my kids will still be Potters, and that perhaps they’ll be treated…you know…*normally*, because of it? In case the war drags on?”

Sirius smiles. He sits beside him. “Of course it’s not bad.”

“The longer this war continues, the less likely it seems to win easily, I have to think of worst-case scenarios, I simply have to. It’s not just my life anymore-”

“Everyone is thinking about worst-case scenarios, James. There’s no shame in it.”

Only an utter idiot would not think about ‘what if we lose’, and James is not an idiot.

“And in those scenarios…I don’t wanna be that arsehole, to wear my *‘old, pure’* name like a shield, to hide behind it, but-”

“But we were those arseholes, weren’t we?” Sirius prompts him. “Before Lily, before she… before Lily, we were exactly like that.”

“We grew up, though, so I shouldn’t think my name makes me special-”

“It has nothing to do with growing up, alright? It is what it is. Not fair for others, sure, but it’s not exactly our fault, is it?”

“I keep thinking about stupid Snivellus,” James says, relieved to finally be able to admit he’s a fucking *Potter*, and that means something.

Sirius cares about Lily; he does. He likes her. But he never liked how she made James ashamed of his ‘privilege’.

And James so easily renounced all of it, pretended names don’t matter, blood doesn’t matter. Yet, now, with his kid on the way, with the war not dying down at all…with Sirius not pretending alongside with him, it seems James finds some benefits, after all, to having been born in an old, rich family. He wants his kid to benefit from all the privileges a pureblood name carries.

“I just- fuck. We wouldn’t have acted that way if Snape…” *was a pureblood*, goes without saying.

Sirius will say it, anyway.

“Yeah, but he wouldn’t have acted like he did, either, if he wasn’t a half-blood with a muggle name and something to prove.”

James and Sirius had plenty of conflicts with many boys; Slytherins, Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, even Gryffindors.

Nasty duels, petty revenges, but they came and went away, eventually. They’d see each other in the summer holidays, away from Hogwarts, in Diagon Alley or a restaurant, and their

parents would all greet each other, Mr Potter would kiss Mrs Macmillian's hand, and James and Macmillian would have to speak civilly and that would be that.

Sirius would have to see Avery, have him as a guest in his house, and eventually they'd forget whatever the fuck made them fight at school.

Snape, though…Snape was away in the muggle world. The Potters or Sirius' parents didn't care about Snape's parents, weren't friends or polite acquaintances with them.

Sirius' father and Mr Potter would send letters when James and Sirius got into a duel with some other purebloods kids. They never sent letters when Sirius and James got in trouble with Snape.

There was no *'I have to attend a ball with the boy's mother next week, James! You will apologise and play nice!'* from Mrs Potter when James bullied Snape, but those letters came when James fought with Boot or Abbott.

Snape was isolated from their world and that made all the difference.

"I know. I know, and I can't say I cared, before, but now Lily keeps worrying that maybe our child will be …pushed aside at Hogwarts; that even if we win the war, even if Voldemort dies, blood purists aren't going anywhere, they'll just be less violent about it. And I don't know how to tell her she doesn't have to worry, because our kid will be rich, a Potter, and he will have a Black as a Guardian. I can't tell her that, because she wouldn't like the reasoning behind it."

"You don't have to tell her anything. Just wait. She'll see. This kid won't be like…you know, *her*. Or Snape. They'll grow up here, they'll have friends already by the time they go to Hogwarts. You know I'm Lucius' son Guardian, too! They'll be the same age. I'm sure they'll be friends," Sirius offers.

James snorts. "Yeah, bet Malfoy will love that."

"Lucius has no issues with half-bloods, as long as they don't marry into his family. Don't you remember he was the only one to try to help Snape, before he left Hogwarts?" Sirius says, a bit harshly. "You know very well not all old families are rabid about it. We're not all monsters."

"I know- *Sirius*-" James looks so tortured.

He didn't have Sirius' experiences, he wasn't brought up like Sirius, but James' childhood was spent surrounded by purebloods, either way. His own parents, tolerant Mr and Mrs Potter, branded blood traitors for their peaceful ways, were not the happiest James chose Lily for a bride. They accepted it, as they accepted everything that made James happy, but they were always uncertain around Lily, worried about this marriage taking place in the middle of a war about blood.

"Then why are you saying this shit? Lucius has no issues with half-bloods, he's loudly renouncing Voldemort, he named me as his son' Guardian, even knowing what a blood traitor

I am, so you should give him some credit."

Of course, Lucius is very much with Voldemort, but he truly never minded half-bloods, as long as they don't 'pollute' his bloodline.

Narcissa, on the other hand…Sirius will have more issues convincing her to let Draco play with James' kid. But Sirius bets he can butter her up to make *one* exception. Especially if James' kid will be a boy.

If it's a girl- then neither Cissa nor Lucius will want a half-blood girl around their son, Gods forbid they like each other *too much*.

Sirius leaves when they spot Lily coming home, from Bathilda's house, making her way down the alley.

He doesn't want to be the one to tell her he's renouncing Dumbledore. She's not as biased towards Sirius as James is, not as prone to trusting him blindly.

Best let James handle her.

(-)

Sirius lays the flowers at the feet of the statue. His father's grave is still the one with the most flowers, even if Kreacher is no longer there to care for it.

That means someone told Dobby to take special care of that particular grave.

It could have been Regulus that gave these instructions, but Sirius doubts it very much.

Sirius is properly dressed now, unlike the last time. His hair is tied back, his robe is expensive, his boots are so clean they shine.

He spends some time there in silence. He doesn't know what to say, he knows his father would hate every single decision Sirius took so far, so he keeps quiet. But that's fine. His father was fond of silence.

Eventually, he Apparates away, in the front yard of a house he hadn't seen in a long time. He could have Apparated straight inside, the wards would recognise his blood and let him, but that wouldn't be polite.

He makes his way down the pathway, noticing what has changed over the years. Not much, but the garden isn't as colourful as it used to be. The many plants, his grandmother's favourites, are gone, only well-groomed grass left in their stead.

That's odd.

When he reaches the door, he takes hold of the knocker, a bronze cobra.

Before he can announce his presence, the door opens.

"Master Orion!" Tessuth exclaims, excited.

Sirius winces, looking down at the very, *very* old elf. Kreacher's great aunt.

"Tessuth is happy to see Master! Come in, come in! Master Sirius will be glad of the company."

He has no idea which Sirius she means. Gods know she served them *all*. She had problems distinguishing who was who, even when Sirius was a child. Time has not made her memory better.

"How is the war going, Master? Are we winning?"

"Sure," Sirius says.

She grins up at him with no teeth. "Glorious news! Did Master bring some goblin heads for Tessuth to mount on the gates?"

Wow. *That* war.

"Sorry, no heads."

"No matter! No matter! We have enough! Young master Helix brought a dozen last he came to visit! He said to Tessuth *'Tessuth, mount them on the gates so the goblin filth will know not to trifle with us!'*"

Sirius tries to recall exactly when Helix Black lived; must be so far back on the family tree, there was simply no place for him on the walls of Grimmauld anymore. Not in the rooms, they spend the most time in, at least.

"Tessuth is ashamed to be related to goblins, Master Phineas. You must forgive this poor elf for having naughty siblings."

"Sure," Sirius says again, happy when they enter the living room and he spots his grandfather. That means the crazy elf can fuck off.

But she doesn't.

"Master Sirius! We having guests!" she announces. "Should Tessuth prepare dinner?"

"I just ate," his grandfather answers, looking at Sirius with narrowed eyes.

"Master ate this morning! It's time for dinner!"

"It is morning still."

"Is it?" Tessuth frowns, confused. "I will bring you breakfast then."

"I just ate-"

But the elf disappears. His grandfather sighs.

"She asked me about goblin heads."

"She asked Regulus for muggle heads last he came. At least she's changing it up. Sit."

Sirius does. The house looks nice; orderly. A bit dusty in places, though, but now he understands why. He understands why the flowers are gone, too. Tessuth is too old to care for a house the way she should.

He knows better than to suggest another elf; his family is really odd about the little creatures.

"What do you want?"

"Can't I visit my grandfather?" Sirius asks innocently.

He only receives a glare in return.

“I’m done with Dumbledore. I know you thought it prudent to have Blacks in all factions of this war, in some manner, but I can’t stand him anymore.”

He shifts under that scrutinising glare.

“I tried to get you away from that meddling goat for all your childhood, and now is the time you decide to listen?”

“He’s losing, anyway,” Sirius says, watching an old vase, so he won’t meet those wise, grey eyes, so much like his own. So much like his father’s. “There’s no need to have me there. We’re winning-”

“*We*?”

Sirius swallows. His grandfather carries on, voice low and dangerous. Displeased.

“Voldemort seems to be winning. Voldemort is not *‘we’*. He despises us, how can he not? He’s a lowly half-blood that will forever remember he does not belong. And he’s not a forgiving man.”

“It doesn’t matter what he remembers,” Sirius counters. “His biggest supporters are ‘we’, alright? He can’t turn his back to us, to Lucius, Rodolphus, Yaxley, Avery…” Sirius swallows, again. “Me.”

Silence falls over them, thick and oppressive. Dumbledore’ s judgment is nothing compared to the man seated in front of him. It makes Sirius *itch.*

“No matter what he thinks of us, he can’t backstab purebloods, not when his entire army is made of purebloods. You said it yourself, remember? He’s just one man. Without the gold and influence of ancient Houses, he wouldn’t get far in our world.”

More silence. Sirius shifts his gaze from the vase to the carpet. He waits.

“And what if Voldemort loses?” his grandfather asks, after what seems like an eternity. “Have you thought of that?”

“He won’t- it’s obvious he won’t. Just look around us.”

“You don’t put all your fruits into the same basket, no matter how certain you are. If I knew he was winning, I wouldn’t have remained neutral. Abraxas wouldn’t have remained -”

“Please, he’s not neutral. He’s with Voldemort!” Sirius gathered enough from small clues, here and there, in the past year. Abraxas is definitely with Voldemort.

“*Quietly* with Voldemort. As is Cygnus. So, in case Voldemort falls, no matter how unlikely the case may be, they can renounce him. We’re older men, wiser men than you young fools. We understand caution-”

“Then be cautious, whatever,” Sirius snaps, because it never takes him long to snap. No matter how hard he tries, there’s only a limited time he can attempt to keep his calm, especially around family. He looks up, eyes narrowed. “I’m not telling you what to do. I’m just doing my own thing.”

“As always,” his grandfather sneers. “Your *own thing*. You have a family that depends on you, a family that-”

“You’ve all been doing fine in the last five years without me.”

“Oh, yes, we’re doing just fine. With our scion running amok, Orion gone, Alphard gone, Regulus too young and in awe with a half-blood bent on destruction, Bellatrix and Narcissa married to Death Eaters, Andromeda hiding in the muggle world, your mother in self exile from society, Druella high on calming potions, Pollux away in France-” His grandfather stands, towering over Sirius. “We’re *weakened*. Just years ago, when your father was here, we were the strongest, tightest family in England- in Europe! Look at us now!”

“You’ve been doing a great job on your lonesome, then,” Sirius spits, standing as well. “You held it all together. Mighty Arcturus Black.” He intends to sound mocking, but he just sounds jealous. He is jealous- he doesn’t think he’ll ever be as great as his grandfather and his father. He knows people look at Sirius and expect him to be like the men that came before him, and he’s terrified he’ll keep disappointing them.

“I’m holding an *illusion* together, Sirius. And I don’t know how much longer I can do that. Never in history has our family been in such a weak place.”

“I’m here!” Sirius yells in his face. They’re just as tall. Neither backs away. “I’m here. You don’t have to worry about Regulus, and I will watch over our interests, Grandfather. I will! I’ll bring us all together, you’ll see. Just- give me a chance. Give…Voldemort a chance. He’s far more reasonable than you think him-”

“Dear Gods, what did he do to you!?” For a second, he looks concerned, his blank expression fading. He reaches over and places his hand on Sirius’ shoulder.

He can’t remember when was the last time they touched. *Was it when dad lost consciousness for good? Did he even attempt to comfort me, then?*

No. Sirius didn’t think he did. He has no memory of his grandfather speaking gently, or petting his head, or saying anything reassuring.

Sirius glares at him, shakes his hand away, stepping back. “I know him. You don’t. Why can’t you believe I, who spends so much time with him, know him better than you, who saw him a handful of times?”

“Because you’re young and impressionable. I am not. How can you bow to-”

“I’m not bowing. I’m not just a Death Eater. You don’t understand-”

“Make me understand, then.” His grandfather steps closer again. “This is unlike you, Sirius.”

“Can’t you trust me?” Sirius asks, like a fool, like a *stupid* child. “For once? Can’t you just listen to me?”

Evidently, not. His grandfather looks at him with disappointment and Sirius wants to lash out, wants to-

No.

“I’ll give you the vote,” he says. “We can go to the Ministry, talk to Crouch, and you can hold my-our- chair in the Wizengamot. So you can rest assured Voldemort won’t get it.”

A flicker of surprise on that old face. “He won’t be happy about it. He’ll expect you to use it as he desires.”

“I told you, I am not just a Death Eater. I’m not a *tool*. So you can have the vote, and Regulus. And you’ll see, I’ll bring Andromeda back-”

“How would you-”

“Just let me do it, yeah?” Sirius has a plan. He came up with it at his father’s grave, in an attempt to appease his father’s probably furious spirit somewhere in the afterlife. *Perhaps he’ll forgive me if I do what he most wanted- keep the family together.* “I’ll help mum be… better, and- well, there is nothing I can do about Father and Alphard, but-”

His grandfather grabs his shoulder again. *When have you become so touchy?* Yet that stern face face hardens even more.

“Marry,” he demands. “Give us an heir.”

Sirius sneers, shrugs his arm off again, steps back once more. *He’s backing me into the fucking wall.* “You mean, ‘give us more Blacks to replace the ones we lost’?”

“Yes.” He says it so simply, without any fucking shame or decency.

“Father can’t be *replaced*.” And now it’s Sirius that steps closer, he’s the own crowding the old man.

But his grandfather was never one to be intimidated. When he speaks, his voice betrays nothing.

“He was my son, Sirius. You walk around as if you were the only one to love him and miss him. But he was my *son*. I’ve known him far longer than you had. I raised him-” He exhales, evenly. He blinks, once, and exhales again. “He’s dead, and that’s that. We need more Blacks. Return to Grimmauld, marry, give us an heir, and I’ll stand by you, unflinchingly.”

Gods, what a blackmailing, soulless piece of-

“You know what?” Sirius steps aside, heads for the door. “I don’t fucking care. I don’t need your approval at all. You’ll see in the end. Voldemort will win, and our family will be better off than ever. I will prove you wrong.”

Sirius gets out of the room, but he still hears his grandfather, even from the hallway.

“I pray you will.”

(-)

Sirius is already exhausted, and it’s not even lunchtime.

He Apparates to the place that has become so dear to him, so *fast.* It’s already more familiar than his grandfather’s house, where he would spend weeks at a time as a boy. It’s already more familiar than James’ place.

It feels better than Hogwarts.

Just this small construction, nothing grandiose about it, nothing remarkable but the man that inhabits it.

Anxiety and exhilaration mix inside him, making his stomach turn.

He takes a steadying breath and knocks on the door. He rarely knocks, usually strolls inside with confidence whenever he’s there, but this is a tad different.

Voldemort isn’t expecting him this time.

Indeed, when the door opens, Voldemort seems surprised.

Sirius left just hours before, after all.

He'd woken up in that nice bed, mind clearer than ever, plan already fully formed in his head about what he had to do. It's amazing how fast he thought of it all; it makes Sirius question if he hadn't planned on this for a long time, and just refused to acknowledge it.

He took a shower, ate breakfast with Voldemort and he didn't mention where he was going or that he'd be returning.

Voldemort opens his mouth, probably to enquire about this strange behaviour.

"I went to Hogwarts," Sirius says. "I told Dumbledore I'm out."

Please, he thinks. *Please, please.*

There's always the small chance Voldemort will be upset. That he wanted Sirius to turn on Dumbledore and take advantage of his position in the Order to hurt them. That he only wanted to use Sirius.

He doesn't believe that is the case; even so, there's a bit of doubt and-

Triumph shines in those brown-red eyes, and Sirius calms. He breathes easier. And he presses his advantage.

"I won't tell you anything I learned there," he adds, hastily.

He won't let Voldemort know about poor Arabella Figg, or Mundungus, whom Sirius likes. "I'm not a traitor. I won't disclose anything I have been told in confidence by Order members or Dumble-"

"Fine," Voldemort agrees, so easily.

It makes Sirius smile.

His fingers close around Sirius' robe, pulling him inside.

Sirius can feel how happy Voldemort is- maybe not *happy*, exactly, but his magic cracks around him, pleased. His eyes are fierce with victory, an intense, possessive expression clear in every one of his features.

Sirius wants to kiss him.

So he does. There's nothing sexual about it; Sirius is well satisfied, after all, the orgasm from the past night still tingling under his skin.

"I hope you didn't tell Dumbledore you're staying with me," Voldemort says, when Sirius runs out of air and lets him go.

"I wanted to," Sirius whispers against his lips. "But I didn't. I only said I'm done with the Order."

"Good."

“He knows, anyway.”

“Of course he does.” Voldemort sounds *so* content. “But it’s better left unsaid.”

Now it’s Voldemort kissing him, his fingers cool and strong at the back of Sirius’ head.

“I gave my seat to grandfather. In the Wizengamot,” Sirius tries to say, to test Voldemort again, to gauge if-

“I don’t care,” Voldemort says, shutting him up.

(-)

It’s incredible how good his life gets, overnight. Not much changes, in effect, it’s not like Sirius had a lot to do with the Order lately anyway, but everything seem different.

There’s nothing looming over his head. No great choice to make, no back and forth, no tug of war in his mind- it’s *done*.

James is conveniently out of the war, same as Lily, and won’t be able to fight for at least a year or so.

And Peter looks so relieved when Sirius and James inform him they’re done with the Order.

“There,” Peter says, after he sends Dumbledore the letter informing him that he’s out. “Let’s see if he’ll call all of us Death Eaters now, for leaving.”

It’s only been a couple of days and Dumbledore is already telling people Sirius is a Death Eater.

James’ eye twitches, his jaws set. “The bastard,” he mutters.

Sirius assumes Dumbledore shared his ‘suspicions’ with Lily, that the old man knew better than to approach James directly with it.

And Lily does give Sirius a few scrutinising glances when he goes to see them in the morning, but he thinks she doesn’t truly believe Dumbledore.

“He’s-” She sighs. “Bathilda told me he used to…you know…*date* Grindelwald.”

Sirius and James spit out their teas, simultaneously.

“*What?*”

Lily shrugs. “I didn’t believe her at first, but she showed me letters. Grindelwald is her nephew, you see. It’s- quite *disturbing,* frankly. I wish I never saw that.” She shakes her head and refuses to tell them more, says she promised Bathilda she wouldn’t. Sirius is positively

burning with curiosity, but Lily keeps it at that. “I think he sees dark wizards everywhere now. He’s weary. Too weary, probably.”

“But you have to tell me more,” James begs her throughout the morning. “Come on, you can’t keep something like that for yourself. Remember, no secrets between us!”

Lily remains strong, doesn’t give them details, but that’s fine. James is also very obviously avoiding telling her that Sirius is back in touch with his family.

(-)

When Sirius attends his first meeting with the entire inner circle unmasked, no one protests to his presence, the way they protested to him in the Order.

No one seems surprised.

Yaxley, Avery, Rowle, Rookwood, Wilkes, the little bitch Parkinson-

Sirius is welcomed openly, with smiles, with nods, with no suspicions.

It’s not only because Sirius always belonged there, that it’s natural for him to sit beside these men- no. It’s also that they trust Voldemort and his judgement unquestionably, unlike some in the Order that sometimes doubt Dumbledore’s judgment.

You proved them right. They told Dumbledore your blood will prevail in the end, and Dumbledore vouched for you, but you proved them right.

Still, Sirius can’t muster much regret or guilt. Not anymore. He lived with guilt for too long. He’s done with it.

The meeting is tenser, though. Not that the atmosphere was exactly relaxed, before, when it was just Sirius, Lucius and the Lestrange, but now-

Voldemort is somehow colder, though he doesn’t necessarily act differently. But there’s something in his eyes, or rather- there’s something *lacking* from his eyes.

And if Lucius has a healthy dose of self preservation that makes him choose his words carefully around Voldemort, if Rabastan is a bit terrified-

Well, it’s nothing compared to the others. Avery keeps *flinching* every time he’s asked a question. Parkinson never meets even the general position of Voldemort’s eyes, staring at his shoulder when he has to address him directly.

Yaxley and Rookwood, the oldest of the lot, have more composure but it’s clear that neither benefits from the sort of familiarity the Lestrange and Lucius enjoy.

And Sirius, of course.

Though it's irritating because at the moment, Voldemort doesn't pay him more attention than the others. He doesn't smile at all, and Sirius got far too used to seeing him smiling, or at least threatening to smile. It's a bit unnerving to see him so blank.

And the one time he does smile, slightly, it's at Bella.

Stupid cunt, Sirius thinks with jealousy, glaring at her and her glossy hair, her perfect lips-

I'm just as perfect, he reassures himself.

It's actually a good thing Voldemort doesn't smile at him, because apparently all the Death Eaters think he's fucking Bella, just on account of him offering her a smile or a compliment in a meeting, when he never extends the same curtesy to others. Sirius certainly doesn't want people to think Voldemort is fucking him.

"No need for such formalities," Voldemort says, when he concludes the meeting and everyone is ready to dive to the floor and kneel. "Not amongst ourselves."

Everyone freezes, unsure, Avery half-way to the floor. Before anyone reacts, Voldemort leaves the room, a stunned silence in his wake.

Rodolphus sighs, rubs his temples. It's almost a ritual by now- Rodolphus sighs like an old women these days, every time he's in Voldemort's and Sirius' company.

"What was that about?" Avery enquires, picking himself off the floor.

"I don't know," Yaxley offers, "but I'm glad for it. It was getting kind of old."

Rookwood mutters in agreement.

Lucius' too intelligent eyes zero in on Sirius.

"What?" Sirius barks at him.

"Nothing," he says, slowly, making his way to the door.

It's not difficult to figure out this is for Sirius' benefit, after all. It was one thing for Voldemort to allow Sirius to 'defy' him by standing, when it was only family around, but it wouldn't be a good look in front of the entire inner circle.

Either Sirius kneels with them, or *no one* kneels.

"Wasn't Dolohov in the inner circle?" Sirius asks Rodolphus, because he remembers seeing the Russian in Bella's memories of the meeting where the McKinnons' fate was decided.

"He *is*." Rodolphus sneers at him, as the others trickle out of the room after Lucius.

So his absence is also for Sirius' benefit. Voldemort probably guesses Sirius wouldn't react well to Dolohov, not after what he did to Marlene's little nephew.

Then again, you're two feet away from Marlene's murderer and that doesn't bother you too much, does it?

Sure, but Dolohov isn't *Bella*.

Later that night, Sirius makes sure to reward Voldemort by crowding him against his desk and kneeling to suck his cock.

(-)

Sirius brings Voldemort books from Grimmauld's secret library. It's endearing and also *sad* how excited Voldemort is to read them, one of the only occasions he truly seems happy.

He's no good to the world as he reads and he's one person Sirius doesn't have to tell to mind the parchments frail state.

Of course, Sirius doesn't bring him these things to make him happy, though it's a nice side effect.

He has a goal, but he'll ease into it. He'll keep bringing stuff over, and, one day, he'll slip the parchments he read about Horcruxes and how devastating and detrimental they are.

Voldemort has to read that. Sirius just knows he hadn't. These type of books are not just rare, they are *forgotten* knowledge, hidden away in ancient wizarding houses. Some are in languages that have been dead by the time Latin came around.

Voldemort complains about that, about purebloods *hoarding* magic; Sirius' mother complains, too, when she sees Sirius taking the parchments out.

"Those are meant for *us*. Not anyone else."

The *house* agreed; Sirius would like to know which one of his arsehole ancestors warded the house in an attempt to keep the books inside it.

Sirius had to wrestle with the damn wards for hours before he managed to leave with the books.

They can't be copied, either, not by any spell. Voldemort tries, bless him, casting for almost an hour, but there's just no going past the curses.

"I don't need a copy, anyway," Voldemort finally says, admitting defeat. "I will simply remember everything."

A shame. If Voldemort decided to copy them by hand, then the war would have ended, because he'd have been stuck scribbling down notes for at least ten or so years.

"Pity I don't have Kreacher anymore," Sirius says. "He knew how to write, in English and Latin. He could have copied the texts."

"Did he?"

"Of course."

"I've never heard of an elf that could read or write."

Sirius huffs. "The really old ones know. Different times. His great aunt even speaks Common Brittonic."

Regulus is attempting to teach Dobby his letters. It's a very slow going process, Sirius is told.

Dobby is doing great. He even stopped shaking when he's summoned.

And he's a smart blighter- well, smart for an elf, at least. He must have noticed the house doesn't bond with him as it should.

Because it's bonded with Kreacher, who Sirius has to assume is alive and well in France.

Even when there are several elves under one roof, only one bonds with the hearth of the house. The head elf, the only one allowed all of the secrets of the house, access to its ancient magic.

Yet Dobby never mentioned it. *Good elf*.

But weak. He doesn't dare stop Sirius' mother from cooking. This leads to fires and black smoke coming out of the kitchen here and there, Regulus says, but it makes his mother like Dobby better.

Dobby also doesn't badger his mother about her drinking, which isn't that good. Apparently Kreacher stopped her from going all out, but now she's *'in a good mood*', as she calls it, at most times of the day.

Sirius can't stand to see her that way, so he rarely goes home.

Regulus had taken to avoiding her, too, spending more time at their summer mansion, with Barty, who is also trying to avoid his father.

Regulus' absence only makes his mother drink *more*, Narcissa says, glaring disapprovingly at both Sirius and Regulus when she has them over for lunch.

"You should spend more time with her," she scolds Regulus, sternly, knowing she has more chances to convince him, rather than Sirius.

Lucius nods. “Not only that, but you practically living with Barty isn’t a good look, Regulus. People will start talking. It just isn’t done.”

Sirius tenses up.

Regulus narrows his eyes. “*Talking?* About? What are you implying, Lucius?”

“I am not implying anything, but others might.”

“Oh, so what, because uncle Alphard was a degenerate now people will assume I am one, too?”

Sirius does his best not to react, stabbing his steak, so he won’t be tempted to stab his brother.

“I’m surprised you don’t disown him,” Abraxas tells Sirius’ father, as they both watch Alphard talking to a man in the corner, smiling at him.

It seems to Sirius that his uncle is having a good time, but it makes other people uncomfortable.

“He’s my cousin,” his father answers, sharply. “And I suggest you mind your own business.”

No one bothered Alphard about his *inclinations*, outside the family; his name protected him from any scorn. And the fact that he wasn’t disowned meant he had tacit permission from the family.

Yet even if Alphard wasn’t disowned, that doesn’t mean it was easy.

Sirius remembers many fights; Alphard wasn’t doing his *duty*, he wasn’t giving House Black more children, he wasn’t helping enough in the Ministry. He drank too much, and he entertained male company.

His father never forgave Alphard for refusing to marry Lucretia.

Orion Black wanted all his family around him, and he thought Alphard’s predilections made Lucretia marry a non-Black, leaving their family home. And his father loved and missed his sister very much.

Still, he didn’t disown Alphard, but he banished him often, long periods of times Sirius can remember his uncle missing, not stepping foot inside Grimmauld. Yet they always reconciled, eventually. His father had a soft spot for his relatives, no matter how much he disagreed with their lifestyle.

When his mother found Sirius with the Roiser cousin, she blamed Alphard and his influence. Alphard wasn’t allowed anywhere near Sirius and Regulus anymore, even if all throughout their childhood Alphard was known as the fun uncle that took them on holidays one week each summer and let them eat and act however they wanted, far away from England.

“It’s not a contagious disease, Walburga,” Sirius overheard his father telling his mother. *“He didn’t get it from Alphard, don’t be ridiculous.”*

"I know Alphard! He'd only encourage Sirius! He was the one that gave him firewhiskey at the party and let him leave with that awful boy! I won't have my son, my first born, turn into my brother! You can't want that, either!"

"He isn't Alphard. If you'd pay attention to him, you'd know he likes girls. Sirius will marry, he will do his duty, and I don't care what he does beyond that."

"It's not proper, and you know it," Lucius says, unimpressed with Regulus' glares. "It has nothing to do with Alphard, but with how *close* you are to Barty. It doesn't help that both of you seem to avoid women at all costs."

"He's in love with Bellatrix!" Regulus spits. "And forgive me for not sleeping with every woman that would spread her legs- *that* is not proper in my view, but apparently you've all forgotten what is proper or not."

"Can we change the subject?" Sirius hisses.

"You're his older brother," Lucius says, now looking at Sirius. "You should protect his reputation. Stop this nonsense."

"*Him?*" Regulus scoffs. "I'm sorry, how did we get to Sirius, drunk man whore that ran away, protecting *my* reputation? If anyone talks, if anyone dares say anything about me, then let them know they should speak it to my face." He stands, and there's the Black, shining through his brother's usually polite and cool demeanour. "See if they *dare*."

He throws his napkin on the table, dramatically, and fucks off.

Narcissa sighs, wrinkling her nose. "Did you have to bring that up during lunch, Lucius?"

"I didn't imagine he'd be so sensitive about it," Lucius says. He frowns, looks to Sirius. "He's not…like Alphard, is he?"

"No," Sirius spits, jaw twitching.

"Are you sure?" Narcissa whispers, leaning over the table. "He is awfully averse to the idea of marriage, you know. And now this Barty thing-"

"He just doesn't want to stay with Mother. Surely, you can understand that."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Good. We hardly need another degenerate in the family," she says, relieved.

"So, if he was like Alphard, what?" Sirius can't help but raise his voice. "You'd toss him aside? Not let him near your son?"

"Of course not!" Narcissa has the nerve to look *offended*. "He's my cousin and I dearly love him."

“We’d just find a way to marry him, as soon as possible, and then it wouldn’t matter,” Lucius says, calmly, an echo of Sirius’ father.

Sirius sighs. His anger is misplaced. It’s just how they are all raised. He can’t blame anyone- even if he wanted to blame someone, where would he start? With their grandfathers? Their great grandfathers?

Still, he can’t help but feel resentful. “You sound like muggles,” he says, because there’s no bigger offence than being compared to a muggle. “They don’t like men taking up with men, either.”

“Please,” Lucius scoffs. “We’re not like those mindless animals. We’re simply protecting our linage. Muggles throw men in *prison* for that stuff, I’ll have you know.”

“Truly?” Narcissa asks, eyes wide. “Just for having sex with another man?”

“Yes. And it wasn’t long ago that they killed them for it.”

Narcissa gasps, a hand on her chest. “Barbaric!”

“So no, Sirius, asking someone to be discrete and respectful isn’t the same as how muggles handle these things.”

(-)

Everything feels more honest. Even the sex; especially the sex. There are no lingering thoughts at the back of Sirius’ head about betrayal, or having to see Dumbledore the next day, or the moral implications of fucking someone he was sort of planning to bring down.

It isn’t less complicated; the fact remains that Voldemort is *Voldemort*, he’s a dark lord hell bent on destruction, and he’s a man on top of that, so the social ramifications don’t resolve themselves just because Sirius chose a path and he’s sticking to it. But it’s just more honest for him, and it counts. It allows Sirius to kiss him, not just during sex, but as a greeting sometimes, when he comes to his house, or as a goodbye.

It isn’t just sex anymore, he’s aware of that, though he doesn’t know *what* it is, but now sex can be a continuation of their normal interactions.

It’s not a relationship- or at least he doesn’t think it is. He’s not sure. He’s only had two of those, and both Marlene and Rita twisted his arm into it. Those relationships came with fights, with expectations, specifically because both women wanted the relationship to exist outside the house, too, and Sirius wasn’t very fond of that idea.

It’s not a possibility here. Voldemort is not someone to be associated with ‘boyfriend’, even if Sirius would have been so inclined to ever consider presenting *anyone* as a boyfriend.

They're not partners, either. Voldemort is the Dark Lord, and Sirius is his Death Eater.

There are no demands of fidelity, Voldemort never suggests or implies Sirius should stop fucking other people. And while Sirius heavily resented Marlene's expectations that he wasn't to sleep with others, he was filled with a murderous urge if he saw her with another man.

He won't be seeing Voldemort with anyone, and that pleases him greatly.

Sirius doesn't sleep around anymore, he doesn't even consider it, not when he's in pubs with Peter and women hit on him, and it would be so easy to do it. And it's funny, because all of Marlene's screams never stopped him from at least wanting other women, yet Voldemort doesn't demand such loyalty and Sirius feels absolutely no impulse to take anyone else to bed.

He's satisfied. He'd like more sex, that's true, but he's aware Voldemort is not twenty, and their libidos can't possibly match. Not that Voldemort rejects him, ever. If Sirius initiates, there is never a smidgeon of hesitation from the other. And, lately, it's not just Sirius initiating.

Still, he'd fuck Voldemort daily, twice a day, he'd spend days with him in bed if it were up to him, but even without that, he's still satisfied.

He's especially developed an obsession with sucking Voldemort off, with having him come apart, let go of his iron-clad control. And it's to those memories that Sirius wanks, when he wants to come and he thinks maybe Voldemort is busy or would rather read or write or who knows what else he does when he's not around Sirius.

Even coming over his own fingers, with Voldemort in mind, feels more satiating than any of his many one-night stand adventures. And there were so many- Sirius can't even remember their faces, let alone their names.

The first time they go to sleep together is quite…interesting. Sirius fell asleep in that bed many, many times already, but never with Voldemort, who'd retreat to bathe, or to read in the other room.

Shortly after Sirius renounces Dumbledore and the Order, after a particularly mind blowing orgasm, when he's drifting off to sleep, on his side, Voldemort's arm comes around him, his chest glued to Sirius' back.

Who would have guessed the dark lord is a hugger?

Sirius was never one to cuddle, not after he comes. He likes to sleep, undisturbed, untouched, but-

He lets Voldemort hold him, though he bristles at the position. If there ever was hugging, with Marlene, he was the one to hold her. He's unaccustomed being held like that, and it makes him feel like a woman, which is extraordinarily *stupid*, but it can't be helped.

It's probably enhanced by the fact that Sirius came with Voldemort's fingers inside him, again-

Oh, bloody hell. Sirius huffs, annoyed with himself, and then Voldemort's chin rests on Sirius' shoulder, there's a quick, dry kiss to his neck, and Sirius decides it's not so bad after all, relaxes, and is fast asleep in seconds.

(-)

A part of Sirius thought he'd be sent on more missions, now that he's not a spy, that he's firmly and irrevocably on Voldemort's side.

A part of him suspected that won't be the case, though. And that part is right.

Voldemort doesn't send him anywhere; if it's because he doesn't want Sirius to die in some mission or if it's because he believes it would bother Sirius to have to fight people he knows and used to have a drink with…he can't tell.

He takes Sirius to some meetings, he talks freely of murdering or attempting to murder Order Members, but he doesn't involve Sirius in any of it.

The war gets so much worse, but it's the opposite for Sirius, who now lives his life in such a way that he could pretend there's no war going on at all, because he's sheltered from it. He spends time with the Potters, safe in Godric's Hollow, out of the loop themselves; with Peter, having a beer in muggle pubs; with his mum and Regulus in Grimmauld, attempting to fix their messy relationship but only making it worse on occasion; he's at Malfoy Manor, with Naricssa who always lived removed from the war.

He spends plenty of nights with Voldemort, and that place is filled with peace, with music, with pleasure and good food.

"I can tell you're doing so much better, now that you're away from Voldemort," James notes, one day, as they play Exploding Snap. "You calmed down. I haven't seen you drunk or hangover in a while."

Sirius shrugs, pretends to be interested in his cards.

"No more pub fights, either," Lily adds. "The magazines say you've been suspiciously absent from any establishment."

"Perhaps I get into trouble in muggle pubs," Sirius suggests, putting on a smirk.

Peter is the next to comment about Sirius' 'odd' behaviour.

Rabastan frowns when they meet up and Sirius has no new tales of wild sex with dubious women to entertain Rabastan with.

And then his grandfather summons him to ask if Sirius is involved with someone, since he hadn't been seen with a woman in some time.

"It's only been a couple months, for fuck's sake!" Sirius yells, exasperated.

Was he truly so atrociously behaved that two months without getting into fights, getting drunk or fucking strangers make people think he's acting out of character?

Voldemort is the only one not to comment on it. And while the rest of the world should shut up and stay out of Sirius' business, it almost bothers Sirius that Voldemort doesn't seem to-

To what?

He's not sure. But shouldn't Voldemort be happy that Sirius isn't out there fucking people?

His mother once said that when there is no trouble in his vicinity, Sirius makes sure to create one.

He thought her hateful and spiteful, but perhaps she was right.

(-)

"I'm going to Paris next weekend," Sirius informs Voldemort during dinner.

"With Rabastan?" Voldemort asks, mildly curious.

"How would you know?"

"He asked for my permission to leave the country."

Sirius' jaw ticks in annoyance, but he refrains from commenting on it. They are at war, after all. Makes sense for a soldier to consult with his leader before departing, no?

"Yes. We're going to get Regulus laid."

Voldemort blinks, puts his fork down slowly. "Does Regulus know about it?"

Sirius waves it away. "No. He's a strange lad, that one. Has too many standards- no muggleborns, no half-bloods, no blood traitors, no purebloods of ill repute." Sirius rolls his eyes. "But Rabastan knows a woman in France that is willing to play the part of a nice pureblood girl for an evening."

"I-" Voldemort blinks again. "I don't know what to say," he confesses, half amused.

Sirius grins at him. "It's a brotherly duty, and I ignored it for too long. Besides," he adds. "It will be fun. She has some friends, and French girls are beautiful and more open minded than most. It's not all for Regulus' sake. Rabastan and I aren't as selfless."

He watches Voldemort's face carefully, but it betrays nothing. It irritates Sirius.

(-)

They tell Regulus that Rabastan is looking for a wife. His brother is happy to tag along; growing up, he'd always beg Sirius to let him stay around him and his friends.

So he's in great spirits as they enter the nice high end establishment in Paris, where Rabastan is supposed to meet his potential fiancé.

Regulus still comments that this isn't exactly proper, that families should be involved in the process or arranging a marriage.

"You know me, I'm a rebel," Rabastan shuts him up. "Besides, if I bring Rodolphus along, he'd scare any potential in laws."

"Hard to argue with that," Regulus mutters.

The girls arrive, and Sirius has to admit they are worth every galleon.

As they speak, they truly do appear to belong to the pureblood French wizarding scene, knowledgeable about their ways, perfectly mannered.

The one supposed to be Rabastan's potential 'bride' is the oldest, around twenty five, and she keeps a very serious face as they speak of marriage.

The girl meant for Regulus plays the part of her sister. They pretend so well to be part of some minor, but old French-Italian pureblood family, that Regulus seems to believe it.

He likes her. Of course he would, she's perfectly beautiful, and when Sirius sees them getting closer to each other, smiling and whispering, he takes his leave and goes to the bar.

Sirius drinks, keeping an eye on his brother, but thinking of Voldemort-

No. You're having fun, forget about him.

But it's hard to forget about him. Sirius does try, he approaches a group of witches gossiping over dragon-martinis, and when he's invited to sit at their table, he flirts with all of them, but his heart isn't into it, and he eventually retreats to the bar, where Rabastan and his 'fiancé' ended up.

"He's playing price charming and you're paying by the hour," Rabastan mocks Sirius, amused beyond belief, as they watch Regulus very slowly 'seducing' the girl.

"What's wrong with him?" the girl ambushes Sirius as he goes to the loo.

She truly is beautiful, dark-haired and dark eyed, with perfect features.

She looks a bit like Bella, and he wonders if Rabastan chose her because he likes Bella, or because he thinks Regulus likes Bella.

Truly, who doesn't find Bella beautiful? We're all doomed.

"What do you mean?"

"You paid me a ridiculous amount of gold!" she hisses, with an adorable accent. Sometimes Sirius lies to pretty French girls, tells them he can't speak French, just because he loves their accents so much when they speak in his native tongue. "I was expecting a hideous creature, deformed or brutish, instead you bring me this beautiful boy! So something else must be wrong with him! I though maybe he's …*slow*…or cruel, but he's not! He's- what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing." Sirius laughs at her. "I told you, it's just his first time- well," he rectifies. "He's a fanatical blood purist, so I suppose you could say that's wrong. Makes it difficult to find a girl."

"If he turns out to be a freak, you're going to pay way more-"

"Relax, he's fine. Unless, of course, he finds out you're a half-blood. Then I won't have anyone left to pay." He smirks at her horrified expression and leaves.

Obviously, the worst that could happen if Regulus found out he had sex with a half-blood would be to probably take a hundred baths and scrub his skin raw or something like that.

Rabastan is having fun with his witch, speaking so lewdly to each other that some people give them alarming looks, and Sirius-

He doesn't find anyone. He flirts, and there's always an eager girl to show up beside him, but he just doesn't want them.

Which is *disturbing.*

"You alright, mate?" Rabastan asks, when they Apparate to a villa one of Rodolphus' aunts owns and was kind enough to let them use it for the weekend.

Sirius doesn't have to come up with an excuse- he doesn't have any, so it's for the best- because Rabastan's woman whispers something in his ear and drags him up the stairs.

Regulus disappeared from view as well, though Sirius hears his voice down a hallway, telling the girl something about a Black property.

"Oh, I was at a party once hosted by Irma Black," the girl says. "I avoided her, though. She's quite scary. All of Paris is in fear of her."

Regulus laughs. "Yes, grandmother is quite…. something. I hope she doesn't find out I was in France and didn't stop to visit her."

Their voices trail away.

And then Sirius is alone. He doesn't like that he's alone.

You could go back to the pub and-

But no, no. He wants a *particular* someone, not just any stranger.

Fucking Voldemort.

He grabs a random bottle of alcohol and heads to the garden.

It's a beautiful, clear night, even if chilly. Winter is coming to an end, but it hadn't quite yet lost its bite. His breath fogs, and Sirius is thankful he's wearing a robe, with perfect warming charms woven throughout it, instead of a muggle leather jacket, as he used to.

He drags a chaise loungue further into the garden, and settles down with his bottle, enjoying the night sky.

He'd like a fag, but he can't find them on his person. He thinks Voldemort stole his pack that morning, before Sirius left.

He feels his lips stretching into a smile.

Sirius' head moves to gaze to Orion, as he always does. He remembers being very small, frustrated at not being able to see the Hunter in the arrangement of the stars.

"I can't. There's no shield! No man!" he kept insisting, squinting hard.

"Look to Bellatrix," his father said, patiently. *"The arm starts there- see, it carries the shield."*

It took so many nights, but, eventually, Sirius suddenly saw it. He saw the hunter's shape, the helmet, the shield, the club.

Once he saw it, he could never unsee it.

'The most handsome of the earthborn,' the greek texts said, and Sirius, to this day, can see a beautiful, fierce warrior every time he looks at Orion.

His own star is lonely, under Orion, apart from it. The brightest, yes, but *alone*.

He's thinking of Voldemort, so he's not surprised to blink and see the cabin; he's a bit disoriented, the image isn't clear, and it all happened so fast.

"Easy," Voldemort always whispers in his ear, when they practise astral magic. *"Slowly."*

He's no longer afraid of his birth right; instead, Sirius is greedy now, wants to do more, explore more, test it, use it.

The cabin becomes clearer, closer. It's raining in Scotland, thunder and lighting all around, but Sirius is nice and dry, on his lounge in Paris, even if he hears the rain drops smacking against the roof of Voldemort's house.

Sirius focuses, wishes, *craves*, and now he can see the shadows inside the cabin, flames dancing on the walls, from a fireplace that is out of sight but Sirius knows so well.

His breath catches when he sees Voldemort's profile. He's at his desk, near the window. He's reading.

The longing intensifies, and Sirius needs to see him better, wants to touch him, to kiss him.

He's so close now, he can see the wrinkle between Voldemort's focused brows, and-

Voldemort turns his head, abruptly, frown deepening, and he's looking straight at Sirius-

He blinks, and he's back in Paris, breathing hard. Excited, filled with adrenaline.

He's never projected so far before. Not that Scotland is that far, truly, but *still*.

Voldemort felt my presence.

Grinning like a lunatic, Sirius takes a steading breath and wills himself away.

The cabin comes into view again, faster than before. It's easier to approach it now. There's no *real* distance, there's no real getting closer, it's beyond Sirius' capabilities to understand how it works-

Voldemort is standing now, by the window, looking up.

I'm here, Sirius wants to say, and maybe he says it, in Lestrange's little garden, but, of course, Voldemort can't hear him.

Sirius is back inside his body- though really, he never leaves it, even if it feels that way.

He's shaking, he feels faint and dizzy, a throbbing ache starting in his temples and quickly spreading to envelop all his head.

Possibly, Voldemort was right when he insisted Sirius should be *careful*, go slow, not exert himself.

Even breathing feels weird, but Sirius forgets to panic, too busy thinking of Voldemort.

A part of him wants to try it again, but the other informs him he'll probably die.

Is Voldemort proud? Is he surprised?

Whatever the case, Voldemort must be thinking about him now. There's no way he'll think of anything else that night.

Sirius tries to get up, but his limbs refuse to cooperate, as if made of clay.

The headache gets worse, so does the dizziness. At least breathing is easier, and Sirius focuses on that. He needs rest, or at least Voldemort always makes him sleep after they practise astral magic.

And truly, he's so exhausted, that he thinks he would fall unconscious, if not for the pesky headache.

Even with it, he dozes off, swift dreams and thoughts out of his grasp chasing each other under his closed eyes.

He thinks he wakes several times, uncomfortable, but then he's back to sleep.

An annoying circle he can't break out, until he hears a voice.

"You awake?"

Sirius does wake up then, properly. He blinks several times, and when he moves his hand to rub at his eyes, it only shakes a little.

It's still night, but the stars aren't as bright, slowly giving way to dawn.

"Yeah." He moves his head and sees Regulus standing beside him, with a shit-eating grin on his face.

It makes Sirius grin back. His head still aches, but it doesn't feel as if it will explode any time soon. "Had a good time?"

Regulus rolls his eyes, but he's still grinning.

"What are you doing out here? You'll freeze. You look a little pale-"

"I'm always pale." Sirius waves it away.

Regulus drags another chaise lounge, positions it beside Sirius, and joins him in staring at the sky.

"I was so upset you and Bella never took me to the rooftop. It was always just the two of you, up there for *hours*."

Sirius laughs. "You were scared of heights, remember? And you'd have ratted on us to mum, I'm sure. Besides, you had Cissa and Andromeda to keep you company."

"Cissa is splendid company," Regulus agrees, completely ignoring Andromeda. He turns his head to look at Sirius. "You're making it up to me now."

Sirius laughs again. "You must have had a *great* time if it put you in such a charitable mood."

"Shut up!" Regulus swats at his head but misses by a few inches.

"Don't fall in love, little brother," Sirius teases him.

“That would cost you a lot, I imagine.”

Sirius raises an eyebrow.

“I’m not an idiot, you know? You truly thought I wouldn’t catch up you arranged it with Rabastan?”

“What gave it away?”

Regulus scoffs. “The fact that she paid attention to *me*, not you.”

“Oh, come on- you look almost exactly like me,” Sirius brushes it away. His brother is only an inch or so shorter, only a bit thinner, his hair much shorter, but truly, they could be twins.

“Maybe, but you’re loud and in everyone’s face. You always capture everyone’s attention, first. Which is fine by me, as you know.”

Regulus enjoyed growing up in Sirius’ shadow. Other younger brothers resented this position, but those boys weren’t Blacks. They didn’t have to put up with people like Sirius’ grandparents or parents. Regulus preferred all the drama to focus on Sirius, the same way Narcissa and Andromeda preferred for Bella to capture Cygnus’ ire.

Being first born comes with privilege, but it has plenty of drawbacks, too.

“I’m surprised you went along with it,” Sirius says. “Proper peacock that you are-”

“We’re not home. No one will know.”

At least he didn’t catch on to the fact that the girl is not a pureblood. Sirius knows Regulus wouldn’t take *that* in stride.

“Can we stay here a day longer?” he asks, making Sirius laugh at him again.

“You’re a grown man, Reggie. You don’t need my permission-”

“You’re my head of house, you moron,” Regulus swats at his head again, and this time he aims better. And then, almost whispering: “And I feel more comfortable with you around,” he confesses.

“You must have a masochistic streak, then,” Sirius says, but gently.

Regulus long got used to Sirius’ mockery and his sometimes cruel pranks. He suffered them, as long as it meant he was allowed to trail after Sirius and his friends.

“Be careful,” their mother would always tell Regulus before they left the house to go play somewhere, gently, kissing his cheek, as Sirius stood to the side, stewing in hate, because he didn’t get any kisses.

“I have Sirius with me.” Regulus would dismiss her concerns every time, always so confident Sirius would never let something truly bad happen to him.

Even now, when Sirius went to pick Regulus up for their trip to Paris, their mother urged Regulus to be careful, while looking at Sirius with suspicions.

As always, Regulus said *'Mum, I'm with Sirius, don't worry'*.

"That only makes me worry more," she said, and Sirius made sure to 'accidentally' knock one of her favourite vases to the floor on his way out of the house.

(-)

Sirius dares to visit his grandparents when the sun comes up. Mostly to piss off his mum, when she'll inevitably find out, but also he misses his grandad, who was the kindest man in their family. That's not saying *much*, but Sirius always liked him.

He's unsure of his welcome, what with the running away thing, but truly, he's been told so often he's a disappointment that he thinks he can stomach it, if it happens again.

He shouldn't have worried. His grandmother's face lights up into a smile when the elf brings Sirius to the living room.

"My, my! What a surprise! Look at you! You've gotten so big!"

She's a strange mix of Black and Crabbe, getting her features from the Black side, but the stature of a Crabbe. A very tall woman.

She hugs him- briefly, of course- and pinches his cheek. "You are your father's spitting image!"

He smiles at her, and she ushers him into another room, pushing him into a chair.

"POLLUX!" she screeches, the same exact pitch his mother's voice can reach.

He winces.

"POLLUX, COME DOWN! SIRIUS IS HERE!"

He's served tea and scones, as she chatters happily across from him.

Sirius keeps trying to say something about his uncle Alphard, offer his condolences, but she doesn't give him any chance, urging him to try that jam or the other.

"Mother sends her love," Sirius manages to say when she needs to stop talking so she can breathe.

"I'm sure she does, sweetheart," she says, doubtful. "Bitter thing, she is! Caused all that unpleasantness a few years back. You should have come to us. We'd have understood you

couldn't stand to live with her anymore."

Sirius doesn't point out he sent *two* letters to Paris, after he ran away. One on his grandfather's birthday, and one when Alphard died. Both returned unopened.

But it's useless to bring that up.

"I'm happy you came back to your senses," she goes on. "You can ignore her just fine. She's not worth leaving your heritage behind. There you are! I was beginning to think you died," she snaps, when his grandfather enters the room.

"I'm not that lucky," he mutters, low enough that only Sirius hears him.

"Grandfather," Sirius says, standing up.

"Speak loudly, darling, He's going deaf," she encourages him.

Kind grey eyes take Sirius in. He extends his hand, and Sirius shakes it.

"I'm deeply sorry for your loss," he finally gets to say. "Uncle Alphard was a great man."

His grandmother *scoffs* from her armchair.

"Thank you, Sirius," his grandfather says. "A tragedy to lose both Orion and Alphard so close to each other."

"Dear Gods, it's ten o'clock, don't spoil the day this early!"

"What?" His grandfather asks, frowning innocently. "I'm sorry, love, I didn't quite catch that."

Throughout the next hour it becomes obvious the man's hearing is perfectly fine, he's only pretending to be deaf when his wife says something unsavoury. Which is *often*.

"And what brings you to Paris?"

"Oh, I came with Rabastan, he's looking for a wife-"

"That Lestrange boy? The younger one?"

"Yes."

"I don't like him," his grandmother declares. "Don't like the older one, either. Uncivilised brutes. I don't know what Cygnus was thinking, giving our sweet Bella to him in marriage."

He was thinking no one else would have her, with her temperament. At least no one from the Twenty Eight.

"I heard you gave Rodolphus a hard time last you saw him at the family reunion."

A reunion Sirius wasn't invited to attend. It still stings.

“Did I?” she asks, with a shrug. “You young ones are so sensitive these days, any little thing offends you. And you? Aren’t you looking for a wife?”

Why did I come here?

“I am considering my options,” Sirius says, smoothly.

“There’s a gala tonight, I think that young DuPont is organising it- bring Lestrange with you. There should be plenty of suitable women around. I’ll write to Amelie to let her know I’m sending over two guests.”

“Grandmother,” Sirius tries to call after her, but she’s out already.

Definitely a mistake to come.

“How’s Walburga?” his grandfather asks.

“As always,” Sirius answers, after a brief consideration.

“I wish she’d visit us more, but I understand why she doesn’t.”

No shit.

“She wrote to me recently, to let us know about Kreacher. What a sad thing.”

“Devastating. What are my chances of getting out of this party?” Sirius asks, resigned.

“Slim to none.” He’s patted on the back, and then his grandfather asks for more news from England.

Sirius puts his foot down when his grandmother returns and insists he stays with them, instead of that ‘cheap, awful villa that Leta can’t even keep in order properly’.

“I made a commitment to stay with Rabastan,” Sirius insists. “Regrettable, but I can’t go back on my word.”

His grandfather looks *jealous* when Sirius manages to make his escape, stomach filled with excellent tea and so many flavours of jam, he doesn’t think he’ll touch anything fruity for at least a year.

(-)

“Explain to me again how you and I are stuck with these boring people and Regulus is the one having fun,” Rabastan demands, glaring at Sirius.

“I didn’t tell grandmother Regulus is Paris, but I told her about you,” Sirius says, again.

“Why? Why would you wound me so?”

Sirius grabs another drink from a tiny elf carrying a tray around. The event isn’t so bad, really. Mostly a young crowd, raising money to preserve the forest of a creature or something- Sirius truly didn’t pay attention.

Less stuffy than England’s crowds, to be sure. Or at least Sirius perceives it this way because no one there seems to judge him just for breathing.

He recognises a few faces, vaguely, from functions he was dragged to in his youth.

It’s the perfect mix of familiar but not *too* familiar, and Narcissa is right, even if he’ll never admit it- the fashion in Paris is better, more modern; more daring, too. Sirius sees some cleavages that would certainly make certain people gasp back home.

“Remember when you broke my toy broom? This is payback.”

“I broke your toy broom?” Rabastan grins. “Good for me! I hope you cried!”

“I did not cry,” Sirius hisses, offended. “*You* cried when I complained to Bella about it and she lectured you not to mess with kids younger than you.”

“Bella can make me cry, that’s true,” Rabastan admits, and then he grows pale, so suddenly it’s sort of funny.

“What?”

“I- never mind. Couldn’t have been.” He shakes his head. “For a wild second I thought I saw our lord, but it must have bee a trick of the light.”

“Where?” Sirius turns his head so fast in the direction Rabastan is staring at; a muscle in his neck protests.

He only sees a tall man, moving, his back to Sirius, a flutter of robes, with a discrete, red gleam-

He drops his glass. It barley has time to shatter on the floor before an elf is already cleaning it away in the blink of an eye.

“It can’t be him,” Rabastan whispers. “It simply can’t be. *Right?* What would he do here?”

“Right,” Sirius whispers back. “I’m going to check.”

“No, no.” Rabastan tries to hold him in place, grabbing his shoulder. “Best we ignore it. If for some unfathomable, twisted reason he has business here, then best we leave it be-”

“I’m going.” Sirius throws Rabastan’s hand off. “Just mingle with the locals, who knows, maybe you actually find a wife and make Rodolphus happy.”

“You really are a fucking traitor,” Rabastan calls after him, making some heads turn. “Pardon my language,” he offers, quieter, in French.

Sirius shoulders his way through the crowd and high tables with tiny desserts arranged artfully on top of them.

And there he is, standing alone in a corner of the room, and Sirius thinks he’s having a hallucination, because surely, if he was really there, then everyone would be looking at him.

He’s wearing the robe Sirius bought for him and it fits him *criminally*. He looks like a warrior king of the old, both elegant, and ready to slay some dragons with an imaginary sword.

It emphasises his great, wide shoulders, the long collar snug around that beautiful long neck of his, and his waist- oh, his fucking waist, that fits so perfectly in Sirius’ grip…

How is no one else staring at him, in awe at his perfection?

Especially since he’s wearing the glamour he used when he got Sirius out of Muggle jail.

His eyes are brown, his skin a healthier colour.

But it’s the hair that does Sirius in; for once, it’s not in a braid, but simply tied at his nape with a black ribbon.

And he has that small smile on his face, as he watches Sirius approach.

“What are you- *how* are you here?” Sirius asks, attempting to sound casual and failing miserably.

“Do you find it hard to believe I’d like to advocate for the dahu?”

“The- *what*?”

The smile widens. “They’re raising money to protect the dahu and its natural habitat.”

Oh, right, right. The stupid goat. The host said something about that.

“As to how I am here, it was quite easy. They should pick better security. Those guards were disappointingly easy to place under the Confundus.”

“We don’t need competent guards at functions like this,” Sirius says, trying very hard to look at Voldemort’s face, and not linger on his body. “A stranger can’t usually attend uninvited, since we all know each other, they’d stand out instantly.”

An even bigger smile. “They’re all very busy, as you notice, I’m hardly worth the attention.”

He must have cast a spell on the entire room, That’s why people don’t look his way too much. Even Rabastan stopped looking, though that could be simply fear, and not the result of some spell.

“You look good,” Sirius blurts out.

He really does; Sirius can’t look at anything else. The world could end around him, and he’d stand there, admiring Voldemort. It’s not just the robe, or his body, or his glamoured face, more beautiful and refined than usual- no. What is most appealing is that he’s wearing something Sirius gave him.

“As do you.”

Sirius comes closer. Closer than it’s wise, in public, but no one is watching.

“I wonder sometimes; what is it you like about me?”

Sirius never had to wonder, before. People like him because he’s handsome, and rich and charming. He can carry a conversation, too.

But Voldemort is surrounded by people like Sirius, men and women with beautiful features, fat Gringotts vaults, charming and intelligent. And yet it was Sirius that got his attention.

“Fishing for compliments?”

“For the truth.”

Voldemort tilts his head, in that way he does. “Truth is a complicated, multilayered concept. Elusive and highly subjective.”

Sirius opens his mouth to suggest he cuts the bullshit, but Voldemort goes on:

“Perhaps I will tell you one day. When you’re ready.”

Sirius raises an eyebrow. “I’m always ready to hear nice things about myself.”

“No,” Voldemort says, softly. “No, you aren’t. Not when it comes to thing that matter most.”

Sirius does not know what to make of this.

“Until then, even if it is your most superficial quality, I will not deny you make for a most pleasing sight.”

Sirius lets the matter drop. “I do, don’t I? Pleasing enough to have you *running* over to Paris, it seems.”

“Pleasing enough to *devour*.” Voldemort closes the distance between them and Sirius’ goes hot all over.

He can’t help but remember Voldemort sucking his cock, devouring it indeed-

“Where are you staying?” Sirius’ voice comes out rough, urgent. He fights the impulse to grab Voldemort and ravish him, bend him over that dainty table. He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Are you averse to renting a muggle hotel room-”

“We can go home.”

Home. Another complicated, multilayered, subjective concept, it occurs to Sirius.

“If I have to wait for Portkey authorisation process, I will faint, what with all my blood busy with keeping me very, very *hard*.”

Voldemort laughs. It only makes Sirius harder.

“Do you think I took an authorised Portkey to Paris?”

No, obviously, Voldemort can’t just put in an application for international Portkeys at the Ministry.

Did he come by muggle boat or something?

“Like I said, my brain isn’t functioning properly right now,” Sirius growls.

“Come along.” Voldemort turns, just like that, and *fuck*, he looks just as amazing from behind.

That robe was worth every galleon.

Sirius hurries after him.

In the hallway, Voldemort grabs him and they spin on the spot, landing quietly and perfectly on the shore, where the France detection charms start, to monitor international Portkeys or Apparitions.

“I’m not against lawbreaking,” Sirius says, and now he grabs Voldemort’s hips, since there’s not a soul in sight, the night clear and endless and peaceful. “But breaking the International Apparition Treaty sounds like too much trouble-”

“We’re not Apparating.” Voldemort’s arms go around Sirius, too. “We’re flying.”

“What?” Sirius is distracted, grinding against him. “You brought a broom?”

He really can’t imagine Voldemort on a broom for some reason.

“No.”

And then they’re in the air.

Sirius makes an embarrassing noise as the ground disappears from under his feet. His grip tightens around Voldemort.

They’re flying. *Unassisted.*

“How- I-what?”

“Magic.” Voldemort sounds amused, and then they’re truly picking up speed, going higher and higher, getting past the charms easily. Charms that are there to monitor all means of magical travel. Like brooms, or magic carpets, or Portkeys, or boats, but this? *What even is this*?

Whatever it is, Sirius loves it.

He loves flying, on a broom, on his bike, but this is far more exciting, because there’s *nothing* under him other than the Channel, white waves cruising against white waves.

He looks at Voldemort, who dropped his glamour, his normal eyes back on display, his too sharp cheekbones, his less than perfect features, tainted by dark magic.

Sirius prefers him this way.

Especially when he looks at Sirius with mischief and- something playful, almost childlike, like he’d shown his favourite toy to another person.

The toy being, of course, an unheard-of piece of magic.

He’s not even holding his fucking wand.

Their robes fly around them, weightless.

“It’s brilliant,” Sirius says, right into his ear, to be heard over the wind.

“I’ll teach you. It is not easy, but I have no doubt a man of your talents will execute it perfectly. Eventually.”

Sirius turns his head to kiss him.

Not very wise, after all, charms need focus, sustained focus, spells feed on intent, and kissing someone could break anyone’s concentration.

But that’s for mere mortals, apparently. There’s not even a hitch in their flight as Voldemort kisses him back.

It’s wondrous. And short. Sirius wishes it would have taken longer, and he hates the Channel, absurdly. *What a pathetic body of water.* It only took them some twenty minutes to cross it.

“How far can you fly?” Sirius asks, when they land on British soil, as smoothly as they took off.

Voldemort’s magic is so elegant, so natural and seamless.

“I am yet to discover limits. After all, I only do it when Apparition is ill advised.”

“You didn’t test it? Gods, we should try flying to one of the Americas. That would be so fun!”

“I don’t do things for fun,” Voldemort says, almost insulted at the idea.

“Really?”

Sirius grabs his wand and Voldemort at the same time, and Apparates them ‘home’.

Of course, it’s not as noiseless as Voldemort’s Apparitions.

“Some would say fucking is fun. In fact, if procreation is off the table, then you only fuck for fun, you know?”

He pushes Voldemort against the wall, as soon as they are inside.

“I disagree.”

Sirius won’t start arguing over silly things, not when he can finally have Voldemort. He makes a threatening noise, very Padfoot like, quite unintentionally, when Voldemort stops him, pushes him away, so easily.

Twig of a man, pushing Sirius with no effort-

“Take care with the robe,” Voldemort orders, harshly.

Apparently, Sirius wasn’t treating the robe right.

Usually Voldemort doesn’t protest to Sirius’ rough handling of his clothes, but-

Something tender mixes with the arousal. Sirius waits, patient, until they’re in the bedroom and Voldemort takes off the robe, carefully hangs it in his dresser.

He envisions himself buying Voldemort a thousand different robes; those fancy Italian muggle shirts, too, the ones even Lucius doesn’t sneer at.

He wants to buy Voldemort a *castle*.

It’s an overwhelming urge, one that Sirius constantly has to battle, whenever Cissa drags him to stores. He always sees something that he wants to get for Voldemort.

It’s no surprise, he supposes.

In his family, the only proper, sanctioned way of showing affection was to buy someone a gift. The only way to apologise, too.

His mother’s slaps were usually light, if humiliating- well, at least when he was small. As he grew, she hit harder, but the pain was always drowned by humiliation. But once, when he was seven, she hit him quite hard, and her wedding ring scratched his lip.

The following weekend she took Sirius to Romania, bought off all the tickets to the visiting part of the dragon enclosure, so Sirius could be the only one there, with the handlers. She

didn't even bring Regulus along. *"Just for you,"* she told Sirius. *"For my brightest star."* She bought him a beautiful pendant with a golden, perfectly illustrated Romanian Longhorn.

Sirius still has it- he took it with him when he left, on a whim, and it's now dangling from the keychain, along with the key to his bike.

Sirius could always tell when his parents were fighting, even in the rare occasions he wouldn't hear them going at it.

But when he'd wake up and he'd see hundreds of roses in the living room, or his mother wearing a new bracelet or necklace, he understood his father upset her somehow.

When Bella married and moved from home, she needed two trunks to carry all the precious gifts her father had given her over the years.

Sirius received an entire vault of gold from his Uncle, and he promptly decided he'd waste as much of it as he could on alcohol, so maybe he could forget his last encounter with the man.

Alphard loved Sirius, but he never supported him- or at least, he didn't support him when Sirius needed him the most. He only dared to do so once he was dead and he wouldn't have to face his sister.

"He wanted you to know he valued you," Alphard's jurist told Sirius, when he handed over the key to the vault.

Valued, not loved.

Of course, Sirius knew perfectly well his uncle loved him, but such things aren't said out loud.

He hopes Alphard knew Sirius loved him, too.

"Where did you go?" Voldemort asks, inquisitive eyes boring into Sirius'.

"Thinking of my uncle," Sirius says, quickly dismissing the thoughts, coming back to the present.

A small smirk greets him. "I'd say it is unusual to think of your uncle in these circumstances," Voldemort says, pressing into Sirius. "But your family is known to be fond of incest."

Sirius bites his lip, lightly, then pushes him on the bed, climbing over him, straddling his hips.

He trails his fingers over Voldemort's sharp features. "Hilarious," he says. "Yet cheekbones like this result from selective breeding."

Voldemort still looks well bred, even with the sinister way dark magic affected parts of his visage.

“I’ve seen the Manor in Little Hangleton. Trust me, your muggle grandparents were cousins of some sort.”

Even muggles- at least educated, wealthy muggles, from a certain bloodline- saw the benefits of keeping the wealth in the family.

“And don’t get me started on the Gaunts. Two generations in a row married their siblings.”

Sirius looked at the Gaunt family tree obsessively when he was still trying to find out Voldemort’s real name. “So I wouldn’t mock anyone else’ ‘fondness for incest’ if I were you.”

Of course, there was nothing selective about Gaunt marriages. Sirius isn’t opposed to interfamily unions, but one has to be *selective*. You can’t just throw random family members into bed with each other, without thought, and expect things will turn out fine.

It turned out quite horrific for the Gaunts, over the centuries. Voldemort is quite lucky to have come out the way he did.

He came out perfectly, Sirius thinks, staring down at him.

Sirius doesn’t like how infatuated with Voldemort he’s become. But he can’t help but feel honoured- special- that he’s been chosen to share Voldemort’s bed; that from all the witches and wizards Voldemort met, it’s Sirius that he wants.

And not just because Sirius is handsome, but something else; something valuable Voldemort found in him that others lacked.

It could have been someone else, and Sirius wants to kill just thinking about it. He knows he would- that he would murder anyone if Voldemort took a liking to a person that is not Sirius.

I want you to belong to me, Sirius craves to tell him. He doesn’t- he knows that’s lunacy, he knows he can’t make demands like this from this man, but Sirius desperately wants him for himself.

Running his hands over that slim, scarred torso, Sirius doesn’t understand how he ever found someone else attractive.

There’s no one else he’d rather have.

As always, those dark runes tattooed in ink and blood and most likely ashes, too, come alive under Sirius’ touch, the magic that made them responding to Sirius’ own.

Sirius can’t help but lick them, because they taste like magic, in a way that magic never had a *taste* before Sirius met Voldemort.

He bites, too, because he wants to leave his own mark on Voldemort. They’re both biters, but Voldemort usually likes to nibble at Sirius’ throat, while Sirius prefers to suck bruises between all the runes on Voldemort’s chest or back.

He's far more passionate these days, Voldemort is. Far more demanding.

He initiates more, he often turns Sirius around, though he's yet to actually fuck Sirius, but he's used to two of those long fingers in his arse once in a while.

He most likely knows Sirius is still struggling with the idea of getting fucked, notices Sirius is tenser when he's on his back.

But even when Voldemort in on his back, his fingers grip Sirius tightly, he kisses Sirius so fiercely and possessively that it leaves no doubt as who is actually in control.

He still only comes when Sirius sucks him off, but Sirius learned to accept it, to imagine Voldemort has his own issues, just like Sirius has his.

Even when Sirius turns him around and he can't even see those imposing eyes, just the proud bend of his back, the straight line of his shoulders, the scars and the runes- they are there, full on display to remind Sirius this man is no mere mortal, not someone that can be controlled or contained, that Sirius is allowed to fuck the closest thing to a god on this vast Earth.

Voldemort's magic is always there, always surrounding him like a second skin, turning Sirius on like nothing else could, but also reminding him Voldemort is way out of his league.

It reminds Sirius of the pyramids in Egypt; he's been there on a trip with his parents, and they visited parts of the pyramids, went deeper inside than most wizards dare, because his father studied in Egypt for years, he'd been a Master of Charms, the only one in centuries to leave the Academy with a perfect score in all subjects.

Deeper and deeper they went, leaving the usual tourists behind, visiting tombs that no muggle can reach, not even most wizards.

But, eventually, they turned back.

Sirius felt the magic from even deeper within, an immense presence, a whisper in his ears, in his blood, suffocating and all- encompassing, as if it was alive and cognitive.

Regulus started crying, and his mother was weary. *"I think this is enough, let us head back,"* she said.

His father agreed, but Sirius stood there, watching the dark, winding path ahead, hairs standing up on his arms, at the nape of his neck, but he was curious, he wanted to-

"Some magic is best left alone," his father told him, bending so he was eye level with Sirius. *"Not all mysteries are meant to be unravelled."*

Even as they left, Sirius kept looking back; he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever lay in those depths wanted him. He couldn't shake the feeling that it was alone, secluded by its own power, exiled for eternity.

Voldemort's magic is very similar to that; too powerful, compelling, mysterious and impossible to understand.

Sirius is certain Voldemort saw every piece of the pyramids; that he dwelled in places no wizard should have barged into, all over the world, that he not only withstood those ancient pockets of magic, but he subdued them, understood them, bent them to his will.

(-)

“Which uncle were you thinking of?” Voldemort asks, standing. He walks to his dresser and picks one of his many black robes.

“What?” Then he remembers the little exchange before they fucked. “Oh. Alphard.” Sirius watches him putting on the robe. He wonders how many times Voldemort is naked under his robes. Rarely, probably, if ever.

Loads of older wizards wear nothing under their robes, but the trend is dying down with younger generations, with newer robes that can be buttoned up or left unclasped.

But a man raised by muggles probably never felt comfortable leaving the house in just a robe.

“Strange.” Voldemort smirks at him. “Cygnus is better looking, by far.”

Sirius throws a pillow at him. He puts some magic behind it, making sure it travels fast, but it turns in mid air, inches before it hits Voldemort, and comes back just as quickly to smash Sirius in the face.

“It wasn’t like that, Merlin!” Sirius hisses, throwing the pillow on the floor.

He’s not bothered about Voldemort’s stupid joke that Sirius would lust over his relatives, but the fact that he called Cygnus ‘better looking’, which implies he finds Cygnus good looking, which further implies Voldemort *looks* at people.

“And Cygnus is disgusting,” he adds, crossing his arms over his chest.

“He has a difficult personality, but it’s not reflected on the outside. A common trait amongst your family. In fact, you take greatly after Cygnus, in many ways.”

Sirius would throw the candlestick on the night table at him, but he’s worried it will just turn around to hit Sirius, like the pillow, only the candlestick is heavy, so he pushes the urge away and settles to glare at Voldemort, who looks back, amused.

Voldemort sits on the corner of the bed, the mattress barely shifting under his light weight.

“You rarely mention Alphard. In fact, you only did it once.”

Sirius raises an eyebrow. “I don’t enjoy talking about my family.”

A laugh. Sirius really likes the way Voldemort laughs, even when it’s at Sirius’ expense.

“You talk about your family practically every day, Sirius. How else would I know the name of your grandmother’s favourite cat?”

He can’t believe he told that to Voldemort. Though, he does vaguely recall saying the little scar on his neck was left by Athena. Sirius was young, and he thought to give the cat a bath. Athena didn’t like it, not one bit. He hid the scratches with his hair and high collars, because if his grandfather caught wind Sirius bothered his grandmother’s beloved cat, he’d have no doubt taken a belt to him.

“Fine, I mention them in passing from time to time,” Sirius concedes, begrudgingly.

“But not Alphard. Yet Bellatrix says he was your favourite uncle, that your mother burned him off the tapestry because he gave you his gold.”

Sirius huffs. “Unlikely.” He hesitates, bites his lip. “I doubt it had anything to do with me.”

“How did he die?”

“Are you going into my mind?” Sirius snarls at him, unnerved by how many times Voldemort hits the nail on the head.

“I would be sorely disappointed if I would be able to do that without you noticing.”

Sirius knows it isn’t Legilimency. He’s just concerned with how Voldemort guesses stuff.

“He killed himself,” Sirius says. “Surprised dear Bella didn’t tell you, since she tells you everything.”

“I never asked.”

“Then why are you asking me?” Sirius is aware he sounds petulant but he can’t help it.

“Because it seems you’re bothered about it.”

“Well, I am.” Sirius gets off the bed, picks up his pants, looks around after his trousers.

Drop it.

But Voldemort doesn’t drop it. He sometimes does, when he senses Sirius is averse to a subject. Other times, he *pushes*.

“He never struck me as the kind to kill himself.”

Sirius grits his teeth, finding his trousers and making a show of being interested in them. “He was terminally ill.”

“I wasn’t aware-”

“You can’t be aware of everything, can you?”

He knows snapping at Voldemort will only make Voldemort realise this is important and painful for Sirius. And, indeed-

“Not many ailments are terminal in our world.”

Sirius says nothing, grabbing his shirt. He has half a mind to Apparate without it.

But that would be dramatic, and he decided recently that he won’t act like a rash, weak boy any longer.

“Generally, only curses accomplish that,” Voldemort goes on.

Last chance for you to drop it, Sirius thinks.

“The same bloodline curse that manifested in Orion?”

“Aren’t you a genius?” Sirius mutters. And then, more firmly, and hastily so they can end the interrogation: “He decided to end it quickly, especially after he saw what it did to Father. He told no one about it, said no goodbyes, and I bet that’s why mum burned him off the tapestry.” He breathes out, clenching his shirt tightly, his back still to Voldemort. “When I ran away, I went to Alphard. I didn’t know where else- I needed him. But he didn’t take me in.”

“You’re more than welcome to stay here for a few days, until you calm down. But, after that, you have to go back home.”

“I thought you’d understand,” Sirius yelled at him, so betrayed.

Though it was stupid of him to go to his uncle. Alphard never left the family, not truly, always dancing on a precarious line.

“I do understand, Sirius.” He tries to put a hand on his shoulder, but Sirius shrugs it away. “I understand too well. But Walburga lost her husband. She never liked Arcturus, but now, after the…disagreements about what to do with Orion, their relationship shattered definitively. Father is away in France. Cygnus is…well, he’s Cygnus. And you ran away. If I take you in, she’ll refuse to talk to me ever again. And, in one fell swoop, she’d have lost all the men in her life. She’ll be all alone- she’s my sister, Sirius. I can’t turn my back on her now-”

“I’m alone!” Sirius yelled. *“I have no one. Nothing!”*

He left, went to the Potters, broken and terrified.

Alphard wrote, after. Many times. Sirius never opened the letters. For almost two years, he kept burning them, as soon as an owl found him.

And then, towards the end of his final year at Hogwarts, McGonagall woke him up in the middle of the night.

When he saw pity in her eyes, he thought his father finally died, and to this day he can’t remember the walk to Dumbledore’s office.

It wasn't his dad that died, but Alphard.

"His jurist sent me a letter," Dumbledore said, with his kind eyes. *"Apparently Alphard instructed him to do so. It is for you, Sirius."*

In the letter, Alphard apologised for not taking Sirius in that night. Explained he regretted it as soon as Sirius left, but Sirius refused to talk to him after that.

He commanded Sirius for finding the courage he lacked: to run away, break those 'toxic ties' completely.

'I leave you all my gold. Use it to go far, far away from England. It won't be safe for you here. The war is brutal and you'll get sucked right into it as soon as you step out of Hogwarts' gates. I beg of you, take my advice and leave. Voldemort is the biggest threat to our world- to anyone's world. There is no fighting against him, Sirius. Do not martyr yourself uselessly. Go away and live your life the way you choose, the way you want. It's the only thing left to do.'

Dumbledore came with Sirius to see the jurist the following day. The man gave Sirius the key to the vault and explained Alphard found out he was suffering from an incurable curse and did not want to burden anyone, to force anyone to care for him.

Sirius wonders if his uncle ever mentioned it in any of the letters Sirius burned. If maybe Alphard asked Sirius to meet him for one last time.

He imagines the jurist told his mother the same thing. It wouldn't have gotten out to the general population, just like his father's fate never left their circles.

Blacks don't get sick. Blacks are certainly not under a bloodline curse. There is no credence to the whispers of 'bad blood' that make the rounds, every time a Black drops dead at a young age, with no warning.

His father simply traveled extensively for two years and then died mysteriously in his sleep.

His uncle was a selfish drunk that killed himself because he was a no good degenerate.

Sirius can't imagine how angry his mother had been upon learning her brother never said a word about it to the family.

"We never talked after that," he goes on, making a conscious effort to unclench his fist and finish dressing. "He left me all his gold because that was the only way to say sorry in my family- throw money at the issue until it goes away. So yeah, I'm bothered. Happy now?"

"Come here."

"No. I'm leaving. See you tomorrow-"

"Sirius. Come here."

Sirius turns to tell him to go fuck himself, but the words don't get past his lips, faced with Voldemort sitting on the edge of the bed, emanating calm and authority.

He always grounds Sirius, even when he's being annoying, when he's pocking at things he shouldn't. Something inside Sirius always steadies when he sees him, when he has him nearby.

This is a man Sirius doesn't have to worry he'll lose to death. He'd had that thought before. Sirius will never have to dodge Voldemort's funeral.

He never went to Alphard's, either.

Sirius doesn't obey, he doesn't sit on the bed, but he doesn't leave, either.

Voldemort waits for another handful of seconds, before standing himself.

"Were you tested? I assume at least a few Healers in this ridiculously incompetent country would know to find traces of a bloodline curse."

"We don't exactly advertise it," Sirius spits. "And Bella should be ashamed of herself for telling you about Father." He assumes that's how Voldemort knew about the curse and his father.

Well, Abraxas and Cygnus knew, as well, but somehow he can't imagine Cygnus speaking about family matters and Abraxas-

Abraxas respects Arcturus too much to blabber about it.

"It's why she insisted to meet me," Voldemort says, coming closer. "Rodolphus always spoke highly of me, and she thought a wizard of my power would know of a way to break the curse, even if no one else managed, through centuries."

A swift and almost overwhelming wave of tenderness and love for Bella washes over him.

Of sadness, too, because his father would hate that he was the cause for a meeting between Bellatrix and Voldemort.

"I told her a bloodline curse usually goes away after a few generations. But only if members of that bloodline stop marrying each other."

Sirius snorts.

"Why take the risk?" Sirius asked his father, in one of their last conversations. *"Why would we still marry each other if we risk passing it along?"*

"Blacks aren't cowed. We might or might not pass the curse to our sons and daughters, but we also pass the power of our ancient blood, the purity of it. The risk is worth it."

"Were you tested?" Voldemort insists.

“No. Mother wanted me and Regulus to do it, but what’s the point? If we somehow escaped it, then great. If we didn’t, then why live with that knowledge, waiting for it to show up? Not like we can do anything to break it.”

Voldemort seems displeased. “There is a way.”

“No. There isn’t. That’s not a way.”

Someone, long, *long* ago cursed the Blacks. Who, no one knows anymore. Whoever it was, knew what matters most to the Blacks: their legacy.

The only way to break a legacy curse is for the victim to sacrifice his child- their *legacy*, indeed. It would break the curse, irrevocably.

So far, no one chose that option. And Blacks have died from this curse for a long time. Sometimes it skips a generation, sometimes even two. Other times it kills two in the same generation, like Alphard and Sirius’ father.

It also shows up at around the same age. Around their fifties. A cruel curse, like all legacy curses are- it gives someone enough time to have children to sacrifice, if they want to escape it.

Sometimes, Sirius is kept awake at night wondering if his grandfather had been willing to sacrifice Regulus. Sometimes, he wonders if that’s why his mother hadn’t talked to Arcturus since his father fell unconscious.

Sometimes, Sirius wonders what would have happened if Cygnus and his mother wouldn’t have stopped him when he tried astral magic for the first time, begging the stars to take his own life in exchange for his father’s.

It probably wouldn’t have worked. The curse wants an elder to sacrifice a progeny, to hurt their legacy directly.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Sirius says, when Voldemort is right in front of him. “I won’t get to fifty. I don’t see myself growing old.”

Voldemort grabs Sirius’ jaw, trails his thumb over Sirius’ lips. “No one imagines themselves old, I assure you. Not at your age. But it will happen. I won’t let you die.”

“I’m not afraid of death,” Sirius tells him, carefully, because he knows Voldemort is.

“Only because you don’t value your life,” Voldemort says. “But I value it, so you shall keep it for as long as I wish it.”

(-)

He spends more and more nights with Voldemort, in that small house separated from the world. The days become harder, and Sirius struggles to fill them.

He takes Dora from her muggle school once a week, confusing her teacher with a whispered spell, parades her around Diagon, taking her to eat at Cygnus' favourite restaurant, knowing it will eventually attract the man's attention. He likes spending time with her, getting to teach her about their family, spoiling her rotten. He even takes her to meet Lily, in an effort to reassure her Sirius is good with kids.

It's impossible to avoid Lestrange Manor, since the meetings are held there; Voldemort tells him he doesn't need to come to them if he doesn't want to, and it makes Sirius wonder what his role- his *place*- is, exactly. It truly feels like there's no war around, especially if he skips Death Eater meetings; but he doesn't skip them often, because…well, because Voldemort is there.

Sometimes he makes himself put some distance between them; he goes to sleep in his own empty house, or he spends a night with Rabastan and the boys, drinking and playing cards.

He doesn't like it, he'd rather be in that secluded cabin, but he's frightened that it's becoming too much, that Voldemort will tire of him eventually, once Sirius isn't a novelty anymore.

It's new and uncomfortable to have these insecurities- Sirius was always the one to tire of people, fast, to start avoiding owls, to come up with excuses, or leave quietly from their bedrooms in the middle of the night.

Not that Voldemort gives any indication that he's annoyed by Sirius hanging around more than he ever did before, but he doesn't ask Sirius to stay, either, when Sirius leaves. He doesn't ask him where he's going, or when he's coming back and Sirius doesn't know what to do with all of it.

"You seem rather tame, dearie," old Bagshot says, when she kidnaps Lily and Sirius off the street on a morning walk and keeps them prisoners in her house, feeding them breakfast. "I thought you'd be a wild thing, what with the way people talk of you, but you're perfectly polite." She pinches Sirius' cheeks. "What a sweetheart!"

Lily smirks behind the old crone, and Sirius sometimes thinks she's another one that possibly belonged in Slytherin, if not for her muggle blood.

"How can you stand her?" he asks, when Bagshot goes to make tea.

"Oh, she's fun!" Lily insists. "She makes the best food ever, and she knows *everything*, I swear."

Sirius plans his escape, but then she returns with a pot of steaming tea, and when she hands Sirius a cup, she smiles at him and says 'you look so much like your father, it's quite remarkable', and just like that, Sirius likes her.

"You've met him, then?" Sirius asks, though, of course, she must have. The ancient woman must have met every single witch or wizard in Britain at some point.

"Several times! A couple or so decades ago I wrote a book concerning the history and traditions of the Twenty Eight, and Sirius-" she laughs. "The *other* Sirius, that is, would send your father over with some documents or pictures I would require in my research. Very polite young man, and so handsome, too. A delight! Patient, unlike old Sirius, and more open minded than Arcturus, mind you. He'd answer all my questions, and he'd ask me plenty of his own. A student of history, he was."

Lily frowns, as if confused to hear someone speaking so nicely of Sirius' father.

Sirius ignores the twinge of annoyance, tells himself it's only in his head, that Lily didn't make a face at all.

He changes the topic, but he makes sure to visit old Bathilda- *'I insist you call me Bathilda'*- on his own, because he doesn't often hear stories of his father from a neutral perspective, and certainly not of a very young version of him.

(-)

Removing the Horcrux parchments out of Grimmauld proves impossible.

His mother laughs at him, swaying slightly, glass of whiskey in her hand, supporting her weight on Dobby's tiny shoulder with the other.

As soon as he gets out of the front door, the parchments disappear from his arms, and appear back inside Grimmauld. Sirius managed to break the curses on some of the books he snuck out of the house in the last weeks, but this one- oh, this one is *impossible*.

Sirius' temper flares, and he's close to burning them to ash, when Dobby speaks.

"Master wants to read in a different place?" he enquires, shyly.

"Fucking obviously," Sirius snarls at him, making Dobby flinch back.

Who'd have thought he'd miss Kreacher? But it's so frustrating to have Dobby fearful of everything around him. Kreacher would have insulted Sirius and laughed in his face, wouldn't have made Sirius feel *guilty* when he snaps, the way Dobby does.

What on earth had Lucius done to this poor creature?

"Don't scare him!" his mother screeches, eyes bloodshot. "He's only recently stopped trembling like a leaf or burning his hands in the oven!"

"Master can take them to read in a different place," Dobby says, half hiding behind his new mistress. "Master can take them out of this house, to another Black house that uses Black blood to ward it."

“That’s not helpful,” he starts to bark, but then-

No, a voice hisses in his head, sounds suspiciously like his father’s. *You can’t take him to the Manor.*

These days it’s easier than ever to brush that voice aside.

“Actually, it is helpful,” Sirius says, excited, heading for the fireplace now, that connects Grimmauld to their country Manor. “Thank you.”

Dobby smiles, shakily.

Sirius throws Floo powder into the fireplace, and when he steps out of it, the parchments are still in his hand.

He leaves them in the dusty library, on a top shelf that hisses at him when the parchments touch it.

“Oh, fuck off,” Sirius hisses back.

The library is dusty, the windows covered by heavy curtains, and it pains something inside him.

This was the place where his father was happiest, and Sirius has many fond memories of the library. His father’s women would never come inside. Sirius liked them, he did, he liked to eat breakfast with them, he liked playing with them outside as a child, or, as grew a bit older, he liked to *admire* them as they sunbathed, but the library was just for him and his father.

They’d play chess, or they’d read quietly. In one memorable occasion, after Sirius got his bike, after they worked on it all day, his father allowed Sirius a glass of firewhsikey and a cigar, and they spent the night in the library.

It was the last time they-

Stop.

Sirius shakes his head, heads out of the room, to inspect the rest of the house.

He finds Barty and his brother in the heated pool, under the charmed ceiling in the West Wing.

“Out,” he says, when he enters, startling them both.

Still in shock, Regulus struggles with his expressions. Barty takes one look at Sirius and climbs out of the pool.

A tall, lanky boy. The Dark Mark on his arm is the only portion of his body not covered by freckles. *Embarrassing*, really. His grandmother had been a Black, so Barty has some Black blood in him- the boy should be handsomer, but his father’s unfortunate looks interfered with those excellent genes.

“Out, out.” Sirius snaps his fingers. “You, too, brother. I need the house.”

By the time Regulus climbs out of the pool, Barty is nowhere in sight.

“Is this about what Lucius said?” Regulus demands, anger colouring his cheeks.

“No,” Sirius assures him. “I simply need the house. For a guest.”

It only makes Regulus angrier. “Just like Father, aren’t you? Bringing your whores here-”

Sirius pushes him back into the pool.

“If you don’t want me to drown you, you’ll be gone by the time I fix myself a drink,” he warns Regulus.

(-)

Bringing Voldemort to his Manor feels both exhilarating and sacrilegious, at once.

It feels like rebellion, yet it also feels right. He wants Voldemort to see it, to know this part of him, too. He is aware that Voldemort doesn’t hold wealth or ancient, arrogant bloodlines in any kind of regard, but Sirius wants to show him the good parts of it.

Unlike Rodolphus, or Lucius, who think their way of life is perfect, Sirius understands and is able to pinpoint the wrong attitudes in their culture, too, the same ones Voldemort no doubt frowns upon.

He’s also aware that Voldemort had never set foot on a Black property before. He watches Voldemort’s face avidly as he shows him around the Manor, as Voldemort takes it all in.

“That’s where I parked my bike for an entire summer,” Sirius says, fondly, pointing through a window that leads to one of the gardens.

“So I am not the first muggle filth you brought home,” Voldemort drawls, sarcastic. “How disappointing.”

But he’s smiling, and Sirius rolls his eyes and smiles back, continues with his tour.

He anticipated Voldemort wouldn’t be impressed by the glamorous architecture, by all the gold or goblin forged silver, by the crystals. He’d seen those in other Manors, after all. Instead, Sirius likes to tell him a cherished memory he has, in every room, or at least a fun one.

‘This is where I first cast Alohomora successfully,’ or *‘this is where I got that scar on my knee- I wanted to see if I would float if I jumped from the second story; I didn’t,’* or *‘I’d sit here with my ear plastered to the door, trying to listen to Father’s conversations in the office.’*

And Voldemort does seem interested in these little anecdotes.

Obviously, since he's a massive nerd, his eyes flash when they finally arrive at the library.

It's not as vast or as interesting as the one in Grimmauld, but it is still pretty impressive- well, Voldemort would take interest in *any* library.

He'd told Sirius once that his only good memories from growing up in muggle London were the public libraries.

"Go on," Sirius says, stopping in the hallway, gesturing towards the many shelves. He pretends to be exasperated. "Knock yourself out."

"You're not coming?"

"Oh, no." Sirius refuses to step inside after him. Bad enough he brought Voldemort home, showed him his father's favourite spot, but he won't desecrate the memories of just the two of them in that place, by going in with Voldemort. "I can't."

An arched eyebrow. "You can't as in there's something to physically impede you or-"

"No, no-just. I -I can't. I'll be around when you get bored. Oh," he says, as if an afterthought, though it is not. "Be careful around the last shelf." He points to it. "It's highly cursed and it might take issue with your blood."

He hopes that is enough to ensure Voldemort will go to that shelf first. He needs to read those parchments. He needs to be aware of what he's done to himself. He's probably better with Latin spell crafting than Sirius is, in any case, he'll understand even more than Sirius ever did.

He just wants Voldemort to have access to those ancient parchments.

Many hours pass before Voldemort finds him again, by the pool. It really is a nice pool; Sirius remembers it was a success with the women that kept rotating through the years.

Even his mother used to like it, once upon a time, before everything got ugly and painful.

And the ceiling is like that of Hogwarts, so he can enjoy the nice view, the stars bright and clear on the sky.

He used to like to swim with Bellatrix at night; she'd float in the water, look at the sky, and Sirius would look at *her* in her skimpy bathing suit. Much more modern than what pureblood women wore generally.

Voldemort's face doesn't indicate that he'd just read about the extensive damage he'd done to himself, but then again, maybe he had somehow stumbled on similar knowledge in the past; or maybe he just doesn't *care*.

Maybe he didn't read that but some boring book instead, No way to guess.

“Come in. The water is perfect,” Sirius entices him.

“I’m not a strong swimmer,” Voldemort says, though he takes off his robe.

“It’s unlikely you’d drown in the pool,” Sirius mocks. “I promise to save you.”

That makes Voldemort laugh, as he strips down. He’s always so efficient when he takes off his clothes, though usually he doesn’t get to do it himself, what with Sirius doing it for him.

He takes the time to fold the damn clothes, the muggle way, no less.

Voldemort often does little things the muggle way, like rinsing a teacup in the sink, or hanging his robe on a hanger, or physically getting up to toss something into the bin.

It enders him to Sirius greatly, who’d never think of performing such mundane tasks, when a wave of his wand could fix them instantly. Not that he wants to fix- Sirius leaves his glasses and cups wherever he drinks them, he throws his robe on the floor or on the back of a chair.

But Voldemort is a neat freak; really, he’d have gotten along well with Kreacher.

He swims just fine, Sirius observes. Elegant and self assured, as he does everything else.

And then he wonders out loud what charms were used on the pipes to have the water heated at this exact temperature and Sirius truly has never been with such a nerd in his life, yet he finds himself listening, because everything Voldemort rants about sounds interesting.

It feels dangerous to mix these two sides of his life, but it’s also nice. Voldemort *should* live in a Manor, he deserves one. Sirius has this need to shower him with luxuries, to surround him with comfort and expensive trinkets, to fuck him on exquisite Egyptian cotton sheets, or in Mulberry silk ones; to feed him Russian caviar and serve him rare wines in crystal, ancient goblets with his family motto engraved on them.

But Voldemort wouldn’t want that; or at least he wouldn’t truly appreciate it. And Sirius doesn’t know what to give him, what can be used to show his…fondness for Voldemort. He doesn’t have anything else to give, after all.

(-)

“I stumbled over something I think you’ll be interested in,” Sirius says, after dinner, when they’re in the living room, Voldemort already seated behind his desk, a book open in front of him, a cup of steaming tea beside it.

“Do tell.”

Sirius waits, grinning already. He waits for Voldemort to take a sip of his tea, and then he announces: “Dumbledore and Grindelwald used to fuck, back in the day.”

Voldemort *chokes* on his tea. It's hilarious. The expression of shock and disbelief look comically out of place on those harsh features of his.

"Where in the world did you hear that *slander*?"

"I have my sources," Sirius says, mysterious, but Voldemort doesn't believe him, which was expected. Sirius hadn't believed Lily, either, when she first told him.

So in one of his visits to Bathilda, while she was busy making scones, Sirius snooped around until he struck gold and found the letters.

He takes one of them from his pocket, floats it to Voldemort, who snatches it up and opens it with incredible speed.

"I didn't steal them all, but there were many letters." Sirius recounts the story he eventually managed to coax out of Bathilda. "Grindelwald was- is, I guess- her great nephew; he was sent to live with her after he was expelled from Durmstrang because he almost killing a fellow student. His parents weren't equipped to deal with him, so they shipped him off to England, hoping a change of scenery might make him less murderous for some reason. Bathilda wasn't equipped to deal with Grindelwald either. She said he was so intelligent, that none of her many books could hold his interest for long. So she introduced him to her neighbour, about Grindelwald's age. None other than Dumbledore." Sirius laughs. He can't imagine a young Dumbledore. It's just unfathomable to him, even if he saw the picture. The picture Voldemort is staring at now, that Sirius stole and put in the envelope with one of the letters. The most damning letter, where Dumbledore was plotting how to *enslave* the world.

He was a lanky thing, all elbows and knees, with wild red hair and a painfully young face and naive smile. Grindelwald, an arm slung over Dumbledore's skinny shoulders, was quite handsome. Sadly, he was blond, not Sirius' type, but other than that- yeah, he was not bad looking at all, though this is something Sirius noticed as a young boy, too, when he was studying the war, and pictures of an adult Grindelwald dominated the pages of the book.

"It didn't last long, Bathilda told me. A few months, and then Dumbledore's sister died mysteriously, Grindelwald disappeared that very night, and days later Dumbledore's brother broke his nose over their sister's coffin."

Voldemort's shock quickly goes to *rage*. His eyes keep moving over the letter, though it's clear he already finished it and it's just rereading it.

"It's his writing," he growls. He casts a spell at the parchment, but the paper doesn't reveal it was all an elaborate ruse.

"I know," Sirius assures him. Perhaps he's not as familiar with Dumbledore's writing as Voldemort, who had him grading his homework for seven years, but Sirius was often summoned to the Headmaster's office, particularly after the Shack incident.

"The hypocrite," Voldemort snarls, and the paper crumbles between his fingers. "*For the greater good!* He came up with it!"

“It seems like it, yeah.” Sirius can’t stop smiling, because it’s amusing how this upsets Voldemort so much. He stands, makes his way to the desk, looks over Voldemort’s shoulder at the picture he’s still holding.

“Can’t blame him, really. Look at Grindelwald; a sight for sore eyes. That’s how I realised I like blokes, too, you know. I was nine or so, and my tutors were teaching us about the war; Evan and Avery and the rest were interested in great feats of dark magic, but I was only intrigued by how dangerously handsome Grindelwald-”

He shuts his mouth when Voldemort’s head snaps up, and his red eyes are so fierce when he glares at Sirius, they leave him breathless.

There it is. The first sign of jealousy. It feels like a victory, and it seems worrisome, all at once. There’s such possessiveness there, mixed with anger, it makes Sirius realise that he cannot escape this man, no matter what will happen in the future. That Voldemort is not just a lover, an affair, someone Sirius can discard with no consequences.

Sirius was never afraid to leave people behind. He even managed the guts to leave his family, one of the most dangerous families in Europe.

But Voldemort…

“He’s rotting away in a prison of his own making, like the incompetent worm that he was,” Voldemort hisses.

Sirius swallows, tries on a smile. “That must be the worst break up in history. A famous duel and then throwing your ex behind bars.”

Voldemort redirects his anger back to Dumbledore now, glaring at the young, freckled boy in the picture, that looks shyly at the camera, and then lovingly up to his companion.

He still can’t believe Dumbledore was ever so young. And shy. Sadly, Sirius has no problem believing ‘fucking dark lords’ part- would be highly hypocritical of him, after all. He understands the appeal.

Voldemort stews in silence for the rest of the night, looking at that picture as if it had done him personal harm.

His eyes shift from one boy to the other, continually, and Sirius can’t decide which of them Voldemort despises more.

In that silence, Sirius realises that while Voldemort seemed not to mind Sirius finding or saying other people are attractive, it was most likely because Voldemort sees those people as insects, far beneath him.

Grindelwald, however, was not an insect by any means.

When Voldemort eventually calms down and he puts the picture away, he tells Sirius how it was to grow up as a presumed muggleborn in Grindelwald’s shadow.

“Unsettling,” he calls it. “My fellow Slytherins were so eager for him to make his way to England, finally, so they can cleanse this island of everyone they found unsavoury.”

“Were you afraid?” Sirius asks, quietly, because while Voldemort is very accommodating to Sirius’ moods, he’s an incredibly proud bastard himself.

Indeed, he scoffs at the notion of fear.

“I was concerned,” he rectifies.

So why are you now putting all the young muggleborns in Hogwarts through the same ‘concern’? Sirius wonders, but knows better than to ask.

“But not too much,” he spits, and he’s angry again. “I believed Grindelwald wouldn’t be able to get past Dumbledore. And I was right.”

This time, Sirius doesn’t keep quiet. “Ironic,” he points out. “There’s a great number of muggleborns and half-bloods that put their faith in Dumbledore to save them from you.”

“He didn’t *save* me,” Voldemort snarls, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “I never expected him to save anyone, let alone me. I simply understood his power.” He sneers. “It seems it was a lover’s spat, in the end, and not an act of Gryffindor heroism.”

He sets the picture on fire, with the crumpled down letter. “Your muggleborns are out of luck. I am no Grindelwald. Dumbledore cannot defeat me in a duel.”

Sirius agrees with him. Perhaps he’s biased, but he can’t imagine anyone besting Voldemort at magic. And Dumbledore is an old man now, far past his prime.

Days pass, then weeks, and Voldemort doesn’t leak this information to the public. It would be a tremendous blow for the Ministry, for the Order. For muggleborns. Some would turn against Dumbledore. It would be a perfect strategic move.

That’s how Sirius learns Voldemort has morals. Morals Sirius lacks. Sirius had no issues stealing those letters, believing they will be sent to the Daily Prophet.

But Voldemort doesn’t send word or proof to the papers. He doesn’t strike low. He’d kill innocents without a second of doubt, he’d burn the world, but he won’t strike against Dumbledore this way.

It does things to Sirius. Strange things, that settle in his chest, that add upon the many, many other things he finds fascinating and endearing about Voldemort.

He asks about it, eventually.

“I don’t need cheap tricks to defeat him,” Voldemort says. And then, after a short break. “He never revealed my heritage, either, even if he knew it could potentially cost me some followers.”

Now it's Sirius' turn to be jealous. This is *respect*. Voldemort respects Dumbledore, and Sirius wonders if anything he'll do in his life will earn him the same respect.

"He didn't tell people you are a half-blood, because he, unlike you, is perfectly aware your most important supporters already know your blood status," Sirius lashes out, because that's what he does when he's insecure. "Revelling your status would have risked sending half-bloods your way, in fact. Would have given weight to old Parkinson's words, who called you a savage terrorist because of your muggle blood. It could have turned people against muggleborns, instead of against you."

Voldemort tilts his head, watches Sirius with an odd expression. "You think I am under the illusion my old classmates don't know who I am? That at least some of them would have told their sons? It was the first thing your father told Rodolphus, when he saw him with the Dark Mark." He smiles. "You underestimate me, Sirius."

"Then why are you so adamant no one ever says 'Tom Riddle' out loud?"

Voldemort's jaw ticks. His smile disappears. He sends Sirius a warning look. "Because I am not Tom Riddle. I told you, that boy is dead."

Sirius always thought this is personal- back when he first discovered the name and saw Voldemort's reaction to it, Sirius guessed that whatever this is, it's not about his blood status, but deeper wounds, painful and not to be poked at. Voldemort is not so much hiding the fact that he's a half-blood- a futile attempt, in any case, in a world as small as theirs- but hiding Tom Riddle, specifically.

"Alright," Sirius says, pacifying, almost sorry he brought it up. Guilty about it, even.

"You will never speak that name. I know you like to push, but do not push in this matter, or it will be the last thing you do."

That is what Voldemort told him when Sirius discovered his name and spat it in his face, long ago.

He doesn't kill Sirius for speaking it again; in fact, he does nothing but glare at Sirius for some moments, act standoffish for another hour or so, turning the pages of his book with unnecessary force, but that's the extent of it.

(-)

Bellatrix looks vaguely concerned when she realises only she and Sirius were summoned.

Sirius is weary, too, as they sit in front of Voldemort, who, as usual, has taken over Rodolphus' office.

That red gaze moves between Bellatrix and Sirius, briefly, and Sirius wonders if Voldemort, like most anyone else outside their family, can't help but be taken aback by how similar they look, no matter how often he sees them together.

"I will go after the Prewett brothers," Voldemort says**.**

Sirius feels the tiniest bit of pity for Fabian. He was an alright bloke, mostly.

Voldemort is clearly expecting something, but he's met with silence. Eventually, Bella speaks up, hesitantly.

"You wish for our assistance?" she asks, though just from her tone it is clear she doesn't believe it.

They all know Voldemort needs no assistance.

"No. I wanted to inform you, beforehand. Since you are related, and I know family can be a sensitive-"

"We're not," Sirius and Bella say at the same time.

Voldemort opens his mouth, then seems to reconsider. "Alright."

Bella smiles at him, lovingly. Sirius hopes he's not smiling, and if he is, that it's not lovingly.

"That was all," Voldemort dismisses them.

"When are you going after the brothers?" Sirius asks, and Bella bristles at his nerve to question the dark lord so abruptly, but Sirius wants to know if Voldemort will be home that night, or not.

"In the following days. I am waiting for an opening."

Sirius nods, satisfied they can meet up later that day.

They all stand. Sirius meets Bella's eyes, and he just knows the thought occurs to them at the same time.

She beats him to it.

"My lord," she says. "Their mother- she won't be around when it happens, will she?"

"Sirius' *aunt*?" Voldemort asks, sarcastic, no doubt mocking their pervious declarations that they aren't related to Gideon and Fabian.

There's nothing to mock. Aunt Lucretia is a Black. She was born a Black, raised a Black, lived in Grimmauld, surrounded by Blacks. They are related to *her*, but not those red-headed children of hers that had never set foot into Grimmauld, that were raised with gods know what values, far away from them.

Blood matters; it matters a lot. But blood alone, especially diluted like that, doesn't make a Black. It's an experience one has to live through.

"She won't be involved."

"Thank you, my lord," Bellatrix says.

"Great," Sirius mutters.

As he closes the door behind himself and Bella, on their way out, he thinks he hears *'fucking Blacks'* muttered quietly, but it can't be. That's usually's Rodolphus' motto, and, besides, Sirius never heard Voldemort swear in all their time together.

(-)

Voldemort is in the middle of cooking dinner, the steak sizzling in the pan, when he pulls out his wand.

Sirius pauses the song he was trying to compose on his guitar.

Voldemort rarely uses his wand when he cooks, for whatever reason.

You know the reason.

Lily never uses her wand when she cooks. Marlene did, however.

He casts a stasis charm on the steak, opens the oven, and casts the same charm on the potatoes baking there.

The smell invades Sirius' nostrils, making his stomach grumble in anticipation.

"I shall return shortly," Voldemort says, waving his wand again, and one of his many identical black robes appears out of nowhere, fastens itself over his shirt, over the rolled up sleeves and unbuttoned collar.

Just like that, he's Voldemort, dark lord, not Sirius' Voldemort, the great chef.

"Something happened?" Sirius puts his guitar down, takes his feet off the other chair under the table.

A bigger table than what he first found in Voldemort's house. Sirius brought it over and replaced the old, boring, wooden one with something more appropriate for a dark lord and a Black to dine at.

It's still small, due to the small room, but much more fitting.

“The Prewetts left their safe house,” Voldemort says, and then he’s gone, Disapparating smoothly.

Oh.

A Death Eater must have called him through the mark, then.

He picks up his guitar again, and refuses to remember anything nice about the redheads.

He focuses on Gideon’s sneers, on Gideon touching Marlene. He focuses on Gideon punching him over Marlene’s body.

With a steadying breath, he attempts to keep playing, though he keeps stopping to check his watch.

Three minutes crawl by, as if they were hours.

Then four.

Five.

By the nine minute mark, Sirius wonders if there’s something wrong with his watch.

Can’t be, Cissa gave it to him, and she’d never pick a defective watch.

Just as he was getting properly anxious, Voldemort is there again, in front of the oven; him and his silent fucking Apparations. Not even house elves do it so smoothly.

It must have been raining, wherever he ambushed the brothers, because he’s wet.

A few hairs had gotten free of his braid and are plastered to his face. His robe is smouldering, weakly, around his left elbow.

Voldemort takes it off, frowns, and uses his wand to fix the small hole. Another wave, and the robe is dried, and so is he.

There’s blood on his hands. Not much, just a splatter, as if he was too close to someone when they started spraying blood.

Sirius swallows. So many thoughts race through his head, confusing and contradictory-

You chose your path, he tells himself, and yes, he did chose. He breathes in again, and calms down.

“Took you long enough,” he says, as Voldemort puts away his wand and washes his hands in the sink.

Any duel against Voldemort that lasts more than two minutes is long, after all.

The Prewetts lasted almost ten.

“Powerful wizards. It’s why I decided to deal with them myself. I considered their power comes from their precious Black blood, but that was when I *mistakenly* assumed they were related to the Blacks.”

Sirius rolls his eyes, ignoring the sarcasm.

Voldemort dries his hands on a towel, waves his left hand over the pan and the oven, ending the charms, and the stake sizzles again.

“Should I bother with a salad, or will you act like a child again and refuse to touch it?”

It’s morbidly fascinating to watch him cook, knowing he just killed two people.

But that’s why he has such a hold over Sirius. There’s no one else around like Voldemort. He’s- he’s beyond words.

Sirius spares a last thought on the brothers, genuinely relived that at least they didn’t suffer and they got an honourable death- really, that’s the best outcome in a war- and rolls his eyes again.

“Mother used to threaten she’d withhold dessert if I don’t eat my greens,” he drawls. “Perhaps you’d like to emulate her, since you’re mothering me, anyway.”

“I don’t have dessert,” Voldemort says.

Neither of them have a sweet tooth. And while Voldemort does eat his greens, he’s just as much of a carnivore as Sirius.

Sirius grins at him. “*You* are the dessert.”

It’s Voldemort’s turn to roll his eyes, but he smiles, too.

He has such a pleasant smile. So charming. There’s a dimple Sirius can spot, if he’s searching for it, if the smile is wide enough.

Sirius can very clearly see Tom’s Riddle extraordinary beauty, still present under the ruin Voldemort made of it.

(-)

When Tessuth pops into existence beside Voldemort’s bed, Sirius thinks ‘oh, shit’ and then he acts quickly, jumping out of the bed, naked as he is, shielding the elf with his body.

He only managed to be faster than Voldemort, because the man wastes a second, in absolute shock, staring incomprehensibly at the intruder.

“Master Helix must come to Grimmauld,” Tessuth says. “He’s been summoned by Master Orion.”

“Don’t!” Sirius snaps, because Voldemort is over his shock, wand in hand. “Just don’t!”

”How is it here?” Voldemort demands, and there’s nothing gentle, nothing caring in his demeanour, even if only half an hour before he so tenderly kissed Sirius, his slender fingers holding Sirius’ jaw as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

“Master Helix must hurry,” Tessuth insists, massively unbothered by the nakedness, by Voldemort losing his fucking mind, trying to understand how someone Apparated through his impenetrable wards.

She’s an ancient Black elf. She’d seen it all, Sirius assumes.

Voldemort walks around the bed now, eyes sparkling with fury and *fear*, which is-

“Take me to my bedroom,” Sirius orders; he blinks, and he’s in a dusty guest bedroom in Grimmauld. No doubt Helix’ bedroom, or whoever’s Tessuth has him confused with.

“Master should put on some trousers,” she says, already searching inside an empty dresser.

Sirius is shaking with adrenaline, the last image of Voldemort seared into his brain.

“Where are Master’s clothes? What has disobedient Kreacher done with them?” she laments. “That nasty thing, is that why he’s hiding in Gallia, because he misplaced Master’s clothes?”

Sirius shakes his head. *Fuck.*

There’s too much going on at once.

He steels himself. “Is everyone safe? Is anyone hurt?”

“No, no. All Blacks are well,” she says, and at least there’s that.

Muttering in Higher Elven, unintelligible to Sirius, Tessuth grabs a curtain and with a snap of her fingers, it turns into a robe.

“Master puts it on now, before Master scandalises his mother.”

Sirius throws it over his head- it’s in the old style, the one without openings or buttons or anything.

“They look like dresses,” Lily giggled, when they saw a couple of old wizard wearing them in Diagon Alley.

“Tessuth, Kreacher is dead,” Sirius says. “He’s not in France-”

“He’s in Gallia,” she insists. “Tessuth knows. Traitorous *goblin*! Has he joined the rebels? Tessuth would bring home his head, if Master wants it.”

No one would believe her, anyway, what with her memory issues. Especially if she insists on calling France 'Gallia'. "Leave his head alone. Don't tell anyone you found me with a man in bed," he adds, as he looks into a dusty mirror to do something with his hair.

He looks exactly as if he's just been dragged out of bed. He has bite marks on his neck, his hair is a mess, because Voldemort's fingers always find their way to it.

"Fuck, my wand!" He left without it, and he can't conceal the proof that he was fucking minutes before without it.

"Tessuth can get it."

"NO! Just- do something about this." He gestures to his dishevelled status.

She sighs, put upon, and orders Sirius to sit on the bed while she fusses around him. Her magic feels even stronger than Kreacher's, foreign.

Even his father was a tad uncomfortable around Tessuth, before she left Grimmauld with Sirius' grandfather, when Sirius was really young, after his grandmother died.

"Master shouldn't be in bed with a man," she reprimands him. "How many times does Tessuth have to tell Master Regis that copulating is done with women?"

Sirius groans. "Gods be good!"

"Gods aren't here," she says, snapping her fingers again, then touching Sirius' neck. "The Blacks are here, and Master Regis will get disowned if he keeps up like this." She sighs. "Tessuth will explain again, maybe Master will understand now. Only women can have babies, and Master Regis needs to put a baby in his wife's belly, that cries for Master every night, unconsolable, while Master Regis is out there with strange men. And who was this new one? What happened with that Malfoy boy Master so favoured?"

"What? Someone had an affair with a Malfoy?" Sirius enquires, scandalised.

"This one looked odd. Unfamiliar. Tessuth loves Master Regis, she does. She hides dirty secrets for him, but if Master Regis is lowering himself to bedding mudbloods, Tessuth will have to tell on him!"

"Don't!" Sirius says. "Don't- just-fine. I won't do it anymore. I'll be good," Sirius says, desperate to get out of this surreal situation.

"Master Regis will visit his wife's bed, then?" Tessuth waves a finger at him, threateningly.

"Yes."

"Master Regis will give us a heir?"

"Yes!"

She nods, satisfied. “There.” She snaps her fingers once more. “Presentable, as if Master hadn’t crawled out of a mudblood’s bed. Bitey mudblood! He mauled Master’s neck, the savage. Worse than goblins! Master’s father would have the mudblood’s head cut off if he finds out-”

“He won’t,” Sirius says, standing. “Everything will be fine,” Sirius assures her.

He hopes she’ll forget all about it soon enough, or that if she says something, her grandfather will assume she’s talking about Regis or whoever the fuck it was that apparently fucked a Malfoy, while his wife wept in her bedroom.

Sirius could have gone his entire life without having found that out. He truly misses Kreacher, every day a little more.

“Ready?”

He barely gets to nod before Tessuth Apparates them to one of the sitting rooms.

“Master Altair,” she says, bowing low at Sirius’ grandfather’s feet. “Tessuth has brought Master- ugh-” she looks at Sirius, confused. She looks at Regulus, and Cygnus, and she only frowns harder, “ the other Master,” she ends, lamely and then pops out of existence.

“What’s going on?” Sirius asks, because it’s crowded in the room.

All the men in his family are there, even Pollux.

And his mother- for a second, Sirius thinks his mother is so drunk she’s supporting her weight on statue-

He freezes. It’s not a statue.

It’s his aunt Lucretia. And his mother is the one supporting her.

Sirius’ stomach turns into knots.

“Now that our head of house is here,” Cygnus drawls, sneering disparagingly. “We can put the matter to rest.”

His aunt looks a lot like his mother. Especially glued together like that. Odd, since they couldn’t stand each other.

Sirius only saw his aunt a couple of times, in his youth, when his father would take him along. *“Don’t tell your mother,”* he’d say on these occasions.

It was a well-known fact in their world that Walburga Black despised Lucretia Prewett and had vowed to never speak to her again.

“Sirius,” his aunt speaks, softly. She’s chalk white, which is why he confused her for a statue. Her eyes are dry.

It's his mother's eyes that are wet with unshed tears.

"You look so much like Orion," his aunt says.

Cygnus sneers again. "Your flattery has no place here," he barks.

"Cygnus," grandfather Arcturus warns, as grandfather Pollux grabs Cygnus' elbow.

"What's going on?" Sirius asks, again, looking to Regulus, who shrugs, discreetly.

"I wish to bury my sons on the Black plot," Lucretia breathes out. "Father says I need your permission to do so."

"You dare?" Cygnus demands, shrugging Pollux' arm off. "You kept those boys away from us, you told Orion you'd rather die than allow us to 'taint' them, and now you crawl here and-"

"Cygnus!"

Arcturus stands, eyes glinting dangerously.

They start fighting. Sirius instantly hates it, wants to shrink back, hide away somewhere.

Men in his family aren't usually loud. When they do get loud, nothing good comes of it.

Regulus is already slinking into a shadowed corner, and Sirius wants to do the same.

"GET OUT!" As always, his mother can out-scream anyone. "GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! THIS DOESN'T CONCERN YOU!"

It takes a moment to establish she is speaking to Cygnus, who shifts targets, turning from Pollux to his sister.

"Out," Sirius speaks, remembering why he can't hide. Why he can't wait for his father to come and make them stop fighting. It's his duty to do it, now. He speaks softly, because there is a knot in his throat, but he's heard, all the same.

His father spoke softly, too, after all, and everyone still heard him, at all times.

"I will settle it," he says, with a confidence he doesn't feel.

And if he can feign confidence, self assurance with others, if he can hide behind his arrogance out there in the world, it's quite different to stand in front of other Black men and keep his composure.

Cygnus looks like he's about to argue, so Sirius ploughs through. "Uncle," he says, hoping he sounds reasonable. "Mother. Please." He gestures to the door.

As he suspected, getting kicked out alongside his sister lessens the blow to Cygnus' ego.

It does nothing for his mother's ego though. He can see her breathing in, ready to rage, and Sirius almost winces-

She doesn't. She, too, seems to remember Sirius is not just her son right then. That he is the head of the House.

She squeezes Lucretia's hand, and then she lets go, hurrying out of the room. She does break a something on her way out, but it's still a victory, especially since Cygnus goes after her.

Regulus leaves, too, unnoticed, quietly.

The screaming match continues outside the room, ugly insults flying around.

"Do you need me here, Sirius?" Pollux asks.

"No."

He leaves, too, probably in a futile attempt to keep his badly tempered children from cursing each other.

Sirius doesn't even think to throw his other grandfather out- it's Arcturus, after all. Sirius wouldn't dare. Besides, he needs his guidance. He doesn't know what to do, so he looks at him, expectantly.

The man resumes his seat, on an imposing armchair.

Silence reigns, the echoes of yelling getting dimmer as the rest of his relatives take the fight on a different floor.

Thank the gods Bella isn't here.

"What do you want, Lucretia?" his grandfather asks. He's as white as a statue too, his eyes just as dry.

"I told you what I want," she whispers. "I want my sons-"

"No. You don't want them in our plot. Your husband doesn't want them there. I hear your first born aspired to be buried with that McKinnon girl, another blood traitor."

Sirius' anger washes away every other uncomfortable feeling. He welcomes it. "What?" he demands. "No."

Not that he can stop them. He sees red when the thought occurs to him that he can't stop them from burying Gideon with Marlene.

His outburst is ignored.

"Have the decency to tell me what you truly want," his grandfather goes on.

“Decency?” Lucretia asks, and her face hardens. “You speak of decency? My sons are dead! Dead!”

“I didn’t kill your sons.”

Her hands shake, even if her fingers are folded into fists at her side.

“You pretend to stay neutral in this war,” she hisses. “But Ignatius says no one is truly neutral. And it is hardly a coincidence no harm seems to befall any Black.”

“You come into this house and accuse me of supporting a terrorist?” A muscle jerks in his grandfather’s jaw.

She deflates. “I want to know- I want you to tell me how I can keep my daughter safe,” she whispers, shaking. “I’ll do anything. I- anything. Father, please-”

“You could have kept them all safe, if you’d have stayed. You could have kept them safe if you married who I told you to marry. Even after you took Prewett for a husband, we still accepted you, and your new family. Famous blood traitors were welcomed in this house. But you let that husband of yours poison your mind, turn you against us. You kept your sons hidden from our influence, and you allowed your daughter to wed a Weasley.” He sneers at her. *“Turncloak!*”

This is so fucking horrible. Sirius wishes he’d be anywhere else in the world.

“You claimed we’d hurt your boys if they were to grow up around us, that we’d …stifle them, wasn’t it? And yet here you are now, asking me to keep your daughter safe. I thought *I* was the danger, Lucretia.”

She just looks at him, shaking her head, tears finally gathering in her eyes.

“It’s always the same with you blood traitors,” his grandfather spits out. “You run away, you preach you seek independence, individuality, yet when things go wrong, when life grows hard, you come running back. It doesn’t work like that. You can’t just reap the benefits, without the sacrifices.”

“I lost my sons,” she states, strangled. “My sons! How can you- do you have no pity left in that stone heart of yours? You lost a son, too! You know my pain and-”

His grandfather straightens his back, even if it was already rod straight. Even the slight sign of anger from before fades, his face smoothing out into nothing.

“I lost *both* my children,” he says, stone cold, indeed. “Orion fought to stay with me, he never turned his back to this family. He did his duty until he took his last breath. But you? You abandoned me.”

There is a portrait on the wall, right above Lucretia’s head.

Regulus stands haughtily, nose in the air, green accents all over his rove. Their mother’s hand rest on his shoulder, almost claw like in the possessiveness of the gesture.

Sirius stands on her other side, just as snobbish as Regulus. He keeps scowling, and he remembers he was annoyed that day, because he wanted some red on his robe, but his mother wouldn't hear of it.

Father stands beside Sirius, the ghost of an almost smile barely visible in the curl of his upper lip. His hand is on Sirius' shoulder, and there's a subtle, crimson shade to the underlining of his sleeve.

His eyes move around the room, and Sirius knows it's not truly his father, just an image, but he still wishes the man wouldn't see this.

"We did all we could for you. Your brother gave you gold when your husband encountered financial difficulties and he couldn't afford to lavish you in luxury, as we had done. Time after time, Orion helped you, quietly, while your new friends would call him, and all other Blacks, monstrous and *cold-hearted*. When Voldemort grew to prominence, I lowered myself to address the thief that stole my daughter, and I advised Prewett to be careful with his words, to be smart. He wasn't. He loudly denounced our ways, the old ways, gladly supported Dumbledore and his mudblood loving agenda. I told him to stop his sons from joining the Hit Wizards, from fraternising with Dumbledore. He ignored me."

"Father-"

"No. No more. You made your bed. Lie in it." He stands, smoothes his robe. "I will not use the influence and favours I have left for your daughter, that I never met, that married a Weasley. Whatever power I still wield is meant for Blacks. That girl is no Black, you made sure of it. She is only a painful reminder of your treachery."

He leaves in a flurry of robes.

Sirius keeps looking at the portrait. In one of the other rooms, there's a portrait of his grandfather and his grandmother, on each side of their son.

In the attic, Sirius remembers, gathering dust, there's a portrait with his grandparents and *both* their children. It's laying with its face to the wall, a heavy curtain draped over it, for good measure.

All the portraits that had Andromeda are there too, out of sight and out of mind.

It strikes Sirius, yet again, that no one removed his pictures or portraits from the house, after he ran away. That his mother didn't even clean his room.

With Andromeda, as soon as she left, all evidence of her existence disappeared, within hours.

"Gideon told me you are a Death Eater," Lucretia says, breaking the heavy silence.

You made your choice, he reminds himself. And Lucretia made her choices.

"We had our…differences," Sirius says. "He always spoke badly of me."

Marlene was adamant Lucretia hated her. *"She's all Black, she is,"* Marlene would snort. *"She pretends she's not, but I can tell she thinks me a slut, far beneath her precious son. You should see how she treats poor Arthur- her daughter's husband. She keeps calling him Archie, and she refuses to set foot in the 'hovel' that the Burrow apparently is."*

"No," she says. "Not always. He used to like you before that girl came between you."

Sirius shrugs. "Jealousy clouded his mind."

"I never believed it, anyway. If you're anything like Orion, you wouldn't be a Death Eater."

Sirius hates hearing that, especially while looking at that portrait. He would give anything to go back to those times, to hug his father. To shake his younger self and force him to treasure what time was left.

"But you must know them. Your cousin- Bellatrix- Ignatius says everyone knows her husband is a high ranking Death Eater. I want-I do not seek revenge. It's too late for that now."

She forgot how to be a Black, Sirius thinks. *She's been away for too long.*

"All I want is a guarantee for my daughter's safety. Her children-I will do anything to keep them safe. What do I need to do?"

"She's always pregnant, isn't she?" Sirius asks.

He'd seen the woman in passing a few times. She's either fat, or perpetually pregnant. Probably the latter- it is known Weasleys breed like rabbits.

"She is pregnant right now. I hope she didn't lose it, with the grief."

"She isn't a fighter. She's not with Dumbledore, her husband is a no one- there's no reason for her to be targeted," Sirius offers. "She's doing her duty, bringing pureblood after pureblood into this world. She will be safe."

"You promise? You can make that promise?"

Sirius bites his lip.

"Father is no longer the head of this House, no matter how he acts. Orion left you in charge, not him. You can guarantee her safety. Please," she begs, and it's so wrong, Blacks shouldn't beg. "In your father's memory-"

"Don't!" Sirius warns her. "You used him and his love for you for many years. At least stop using him now that he's dead."

Sirius wonders if she went to the funeral. But that would be hypocritical of him to ask.

"What's her name again?"

“Molly.”

“Molly will be safe. I guarantee it. You can’t bury Gideon and Fabian on our plot,” he adds. Not that she truly wanted it, she was just trying to integrate herself back with the family, for her daughter’s sake. “And you’ll do me a favour and keep Gideon away from Marlene.”

“I would have never allowed for that, anyway.”

“Then we are done here,” he dismisses her.

He hears her soft footsteps walking away, and he speaks before he can help himself.

“It’s never too late to reconnect with a parent,” he offers. “Unless they are dead,” he rectifies, watching his father’s image on the wall. “But yours is not dead. Something to consider.”

“You heard him-”

“You should hear how my mother speaks to me,” he interrupts her. “My father told me you were spoiled beyond belief, that you were Arcturus’ little princess. Perhaps because he loved you so openly, you never got to learn they don’t always mean what they say.”

She doesn’t answer, and the footsteps fade away into the distance.

(-)

His mother accuses him of being heartless for denying Lucretia the right to bury her sons on their family plot.

At least she waits to scream at him until all the others have left; except Pollux, who apparently prefers his daughter’s screams to his wife’s.

“You hate her,” Sirius points out, when she stops to breathe. “We’d stumble upon her on the street, and you pretended not to see her-”

“Her sons were murdered!” she yells. “Slain on the streets!”

Sirius understands when he hears the desperation in her tone, the way her eyes flicker to Regulus, who’s sitting quietly with Pollux on the other side of the table.

“They weren’t Blacks,” he says, softly.

No one will slay Regulus, that’s certain.

“And since they were not Blacks, they can’t rest with us. It’s different,” he assures her.

“Purebloods from noble lineages are dying left and right. Young boys-”

“Mother,” he stops her. “We’re safe.”

He wishes he’d have his father’s talent to inspire security and trust. He doesn’t, because his mother doesn’t look less worried.

Yet Voldemort said Sirius is still too young, that he shouldn’t hold himself to the same standards with far older men.

Maybe, in time, Sirius will actually grow up to be half the man his father was.

Half is enough. Sirius would be more than thrilled to be able to achieve even that.

Just give it time, Voldemort advised him. *Don’t put so much pressure on yourself, and don’t allow others to pressure you, either.*

He sighs. With the family drama over, he needs to go back to Voldemort drama. Voldemort, who is so wise and patient and stable.

He wasn’t *any* of that when Sirius left him.

He hopes he calmed down a tad, in the last hour or so, otherwise Sirius will walk into a killing curse, right after he promised his mother she won’t have to bury her sons, like Lucretia.

(-)

Voldemort didn’t calm down. The house is upside down, floorboards ripped out, runic circles inked in blood on the stone foundation.

There are runic circles everywhere- under the floor, under the wallpapers, now torn apart.

Books are scattered everywhere, and Voldemort sits on the floor, hair messy, still only in his underpants, flipping through pages like a madman.

He can’t understand what he did wrong.

You did nothing wrong, Sirius thinks with a pang of pity.

Voldemort did everything perfectly. That’s one safe house, warded and protected to all hells.

“Explain,” he growls when Sirius enters through the hole in the wall where the door used to be.

Sirius sighs, so exhausted. Nothing exhausts him like family, and that bone deep weariness only becomes more apparent when he’s out of Grimmauld, when he can relax.

Even the couch is torn apart. Apparently there were runes there too, Sirius sees them on the wooden frame, now free of upholstery.

“It’s a house-elf,” he says, sitting on the desk, the only piece of furniture intact. “What is there to explain?”

“My wards are-”

“You can’t ward against a house-elf. Didn’t you see them Apparate around in Hogwarts? You know Hogwarts is warded even more than this house, and yet the elves-”

“They are owned by the school, so they are allowed Apparation inside it, same as your elf is allowed to Apparate inside your home. I have no elf.”

Sirius sighs again. “They can Apparate in Hogwarts because they are *elves*, not because they belong to the school.”

Voldemort glares at him. “That can’t be. It can’t be.”

“There are no wizard made wards to protect against elves.”

“Why aren’t house-elves freeing their masters out of Azkaban, then? Why aren’t elves stealing from Gringotts?”

“Dementors and Goblins,” Sirius states the obvious. “Goblins are practically elves, they have the same magic, and Dementors- well, fuck knows what they are, but they have their own magic, too.”

“Only Azkaban has Dementors. Others prisons in the world -”

“In other countries, purebloods, when sentenced to prison, are made to release their elves, if they own one. Even if they have a secret elf, it’s- they can only Apparate inside places. It’s not like an elf can defeat Aurors or anything. They’d be caught.”

Voldemort glares, and then he snatches a book and throws it at Sirius.

“Read. There are no mentions of elves. Read it! Those wards are impenetrable! They don’t mention any exception.”

“Well, they wouldn’t, would they?” Sirius puts the book aside. ‘Runic Warding’. “It’s assumed to be common knowledge.”

“It isn’t common.” Voldemort is so tense, all his muscles and tendons are standing out, wiry things, moving under his pale skin, under all those scars and tattoos. “It can’t be common knowledge if I don’t have it.”

It’s really the worst time to insult him, but- what else can Sirius do? “These books are written by purebloods for purebloods. For pureblood households. For wizards and witches that were raised with elves. It’s assumed everyone knows already.”

Assumed wrongly, of course.

It took Lily *three years* to learn elves work at Hogwarts, after all. Sirius can't imagine how she thought the castle got cleaned, and the food got cooked.

"I thought- you know. Magic," Lily exclaimed, stupidly, still shocked she shared a castle with house-elves for years and never knew it.

Those eyes are so red, they're almost sparkling. Voldemort's fingers curl so tightly over his wand, it's a wonder the wood doesn't snap.

"It's no big deal," Sirius says, softly.

"A creature can just invade my space and it's *no big deal*?"

"It really isn't," Sirius says, who can't understand this fear. "They're harmless. They can't hurt you or do anything. They can just pop in, that's all. Not like it can overpower you."

"It can steal from me-"

"Well, anti theft curses do work against elves, so you can put everything important in a drawer and protect it with spells-"

"Everything I own has value," Voldemort hisses.

He was even terribly attached to that wobbly table. Sirius had to work hard to convince him to get rid of it, when he came with the new one.

"No elf would find you here, anyway. They can't just pop inside places they have never seen or-"

"Yours came. And it has never been here-"

"She came because I was here, alright? She can trace *me*, not the house. So you won't risk having elves just dropping by at all times. Only if I'm here, or Rodolphus is here and his elf is sent to get him, or he calls it."

"Unacceptable. There has to be a solution. I can't-" he sounds strangled for a second. "I can't live like this."

That's heartbreaking. Sirius doesn't know why, it's just heartbreaking that Voldemort looks so freaked out, so afraid, over tiny stupid elves that can't hurt him.

"Your old elf- the one you gave to me," Voldemort says, and his fear only increases. It makes his thin lips twist with anxiety, even if he's struggling to hold it together. "I took him to a perfectly warded place, but- apparently that's worth nothing. Did he- have you heard from him?"

Sirius raises an eyebrow. "You didn't kill him?"

Voldemort grits his teeth so loudly, Sirius fears he broke a few. “No.”

“That’s odd. He has to be dead, because he never returned. If he were alive, he’d have come home.”

Voldemort relaxes a tad. He breathes out. “There were other…lethal dangers around. They probably got him.”

“You can’t check?” Sirius asks, feigning surprise.

Of course Voldemort can’t check, unless he’s willing to carefully examine a hundred or so rotting corpses, disfigured by water and dark magic. It would be close to impossible to distinguish between them.

“No.”

“Well, he’s gone, that’s for sure.”

Voldemort stands. “What book should I get on elves?”

Sirius winces. “There are no books on elves. Well, there are books about the wars with the higher elves, and the goblin rebellions but-”

“There has to be a book about house-elf magic. You have to learn how to bond with the thing, how to control it- surely, there *must* be a book.”

“It’s passed down,” Sirius says, quietly. “The information is passed down, orally, generation to generation.”

Voldemort’s eye twitches.

“Unfair, I know,” Sirius says. Voldemort already complained the old families horde knowledge. “But- hey, it’s not just muggle raised wizards that don’t know these things, yeah? Plenty of poor purebloods out there that never had an elf and would be just as clueless.”

It doesn’t improve Voldemort’s mood.

(-)

They go to the country Manor for the night, because Voldemort tore down his entire house in his frenzy to check his wards.

He goes straight to the library, and Sirius sees, from the doorway, that he grabs ‘Hogwarts, A History’, out of all things, and then he peruses the shelves, most likely in search of any information on elf magic.

At some point, he leaves the house, saying he needs to check something.

Sirius is almost sure he went to the cave, to check on his other Horcrux.

When he returns, he's much calmer. Sirius is already in bed, and Voldemort slips in behind him, his hand resting on Sirius' hip.

Impulsively, Sirius takes his hand. With his thumb, he caresses the ring.

"I can feel the magic inside it," he mutters sleepily.

"Do you?"

"It's always so cold and thrumming with magic. I like it," he confesses.

Voldemort hums, says nothing. Sirius closes his eyes, and he's almost back to sleep when he feels that coldness, that weight slipping on his own finger.

He startles awake.

In the pitch black darkness, the ring still has that ominous glow, subtle but there. On Sirius' finger.

"What are you-"

"Is it not customary to give tokens of affection?" Voldemort whispers in his ear.

"Sure; a bouquet of flowers, a watch, a ring, even. But not a piece of your soul," Sirius protests, voice high.

"I always go a step above all others." There's fondness in Voldemort's voice.

Sirius turns to face him, waves a hand so a candle comes to life on the wall. He sits, tries to take the ring off his finger. "I can't accept-"

"You will." Voldemort's fingers, slender yet so strong, still Sirius' own. He pulls Sirius back to his chest. "Keep it."

Sirius tries to find words, battling with a choking feeling in his chest. The ring is freezing cold on his finger, but his chest is burning with a never before felt emotion. "I can't take a piece of your soul," he repeats, weakly.

"Why not? You gave me all of yours," Voldemort says, tone coloured with the same possessiveness he had when Sirius teased him about Grindelwald, his fingers now tracing Sirius' Dark Mark.

He coils around Sirius like a snake, all long limbs, as powerful as a python clenching its prey.

Chapter End Notes

I always found it hilarious that Bagshot told Lily about Albus' affair with Gellert, and Lily simply thought the woman was insane.

I know you waited very long for this chapter, but it was difficult to write, not only because of the absurd length, but because this had to cover many aspects, since it is the last calm chapter. Harry is coming in the next one, but I needed this one to show Sirius' relationship with Voldemort develop. Also, I can't stop myself from writing Black drama.

If you're still here and haven't got bored with waiting, I'd love to hear your thoughts. Thank you for waiting! ❤️

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

TW: some rather graphic description of violence. Not too bad, but a couple of instances get a bit dark.

Also, I almost want to make a trigger warning for how obsessed these men are with each other. They're going through it, my darlings.

We get to hear a little from Arcturus Black, because...I have no excuse. I just felt compelled to peek into his weird Black headspace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He doesn't enjoy looking out the window in the living room. That green expense of land provokes an uncomfortable knot in his stomach, and he has taken to sitting with his back to the window.

It's getting wilder, weeds sprouting here and there, the grass longer and longer each time he accidentally glimpses it.

Tessuth muttered a few times about putting it in order, but he told her to let it be. The elf is too old to do a good job of it, in any case.

His wife was never one for gardening, or knitting, or teas. All their lives, they had conversations about proper activities, suitable for women. Melania enjoyed travelling, however. An adventurer, that one. She'd beg him to take her along when he had business outside of the country, and when he indulged her, instead of seeking good company with the wives of his partners or colleagues, she'd go alone to visit one city or the other.

It never sat well with him; he'd be distracted in his meetings, imagining his little wife alone, gods know where, finding trouble. Though she never did find trouble. A smart witch, capable and discrete, with a calm disposition but a quick wand.

She grew more cautious when she fell pregnant, when their daughter came. It pleased him greatly to see her stay put. He'd instruct Tessuth, or Kreacher, to let her deal with Lucretia on her own, to keep her occupied. And then Orion came, and that kept her busy and at home for a while. Until the boy grew, as adventurous as his mother.

He had to put his foot down, then. If before he accepted this need of hers to wander through foreign cities, to explore ruins of the old world- he didn't allow her to endanger his heir.

She did finally take an interest in the garden of their country manor, then, but it wasn't flowers that appealed to her. Instead, she'd make games, mazes, and she'd play with Orion,

pretending they were on some great adventure.

Arcturus would come home and find them laughing and tired- even the elves were tired, roped into those silly games, playing mummies or nefarious wizards for Orion to outsmart to get to the treasure.

“He saved me from the warlock,” Lucretia would say. “I was the princess, taken captive by a nasty warlock,” she’d point at Kreacher, “but Orion found me and released me!”

His daughter did like flowers and expensive embroideries, but she wasn’t opposed to playing the princess, ready to be saved by her little brother.

And Orion- he’d talk throughout dinner, explaining his adventures, eyes bright and happy, barely paying attention to his food. He was distracted during his studies, the tutors told Arcturus, and that wasn’t good.

Arcturus told Melania it isn’t appropriate for a boy to have such a rich imagination; that Orion needs to be grounded in reality, pay attention to his lessons, and Melania nodded, agreed with him, but did as she pleased as soon as he left the house.

Of course, Arcturus made sure his son would focus on what matters, not on games, as soon as he turned seven. He corrected Melania’s mistakes and her lax attitudes.

Even so, when Orion went to the Charms Institute, Melania couldn’t wait to visit him, and Arcturus liked to pretend they would go to restaurants and coffeeshop, or to the theatre; shopping perhaps. Yet he was sure they spent their time deep inside the pyramids, instead. He didn’t object- Orion shaped up to be a good, proper man, doing what was asked of him without flinching, without complaint. If he still liked to indulge his mother with her fantasies... it couldn’t hurt much.

She did, however, finally taken an interest in gardening, when they moved out of Grimmauld, once Orion married.

“I’ve gotten old,” she’d joke, instructing Tessuth where to plant some roses.

She was always in the garden, and she’d taken to knitting, too, making hideous socks for Sirius, who would never wear them- even Walburga wouldn’t allow her son to wear anything but the best.

He wondered if these newfound passions had anything to do with their traitorous daughter abandoning them. If by spending time in the garden, kitting, as Lucretia liked to do, made Melania feel connected with her. He never asked.

The garden withered, fast, after her death. Tessuth kept forgetting to tend to it, and Arcturus never said a word.

In an odd fit of sentimentality, he took vicious satisfaction in coming to this empty house, seeing the garden dying. He’d sit, and watch, as it slowly deteriorated, and he felt miserable. It was the only way to grieve Melania.

There was no way to grieve Orion. If he thought too much about it, he feared his mind would walk out on him, that he'd be left a husk.

"There, there," Tessuth said, when Arcturus was alone with Orion's coffin. She pat Arcturus' knee. "Mistress and little Master are on an adventure together! They so loved adventure! Tessuth knows they're having the best of times! Master should behead Tessuth, bury her with little Master, so she can play with them! Tessuth used to play mummy, or warlock or filthy goblin! Tessuth would be honoured to keep Mistress and little Master company on this new adventure."

Tessuth's bondage broke with Arcturus' father's death; she wanted to be buried with him, too. In the preparations for the funeral, with all the ancient guests they had, Arcturus forgot to rebind her to their family.

He only remembered years later, when he gave her an order and she ignored it easily.

He let it be.

"You'll die with me," he told her. *"You can keep me company."*

She's scowling at Cygnus now, eyes barely visible under her dropping eyelids.

"Master shouldn't yell at Tessuth!" she hisses, snatching Cygnus' cup away. "Tessuth is old, and she has a headache. If Master doesn't like the tea-"

"It's not tea, you cretin! You made me coffee, and you know how I despise-

"Then Master shall drink nothing!"

"Cygnus!" Arcturus warns him, when Cygnus looks ready to blast Tessuth into different pieces. He always was a violent man, this one. Quick to anger.

Cygnus settles, Tessuth leaves, mumbling. Arcturus takes a sip out of his cup. It is, at least, good coffee.

"Forget the elf. Are you certain about Sirius?"

Cygnus stares after Tessuth, murder in his eyes. "I obviously didn't see for myself, he's not stupid enough to wear it in my presence. But Yaxley told me he wears the ring at all times. When I asked Lucius, he pretended not to hear, and that in itself means it's true."

Arcturus turns his head, slightly, to watch the dead garden. Oh, how Orion must suffer.

"Yaxley says Sirius is far too familiar with Voldemort, that they smile at each other, that he gets preferential treatment above all others, even Bellatrix."

Sirius always was lovable. Since he was born, he was everyone's favourite. Even Arcturus' father, a harsh, stern man that never once hugged his children, never had a kind word for them, would often lift Sirius up, tickle him, place him on his lap, whispering all sort of inappropriate things in his ear.

Tom Riddle is a creature, an aberration far from human, yet even it is not immune to Sirius' charm, apparently.

"And this never happened before?"

"No. Voldemort never paid anyone so much attention."

"Bella-"

"It's different," Cygnus insists. "It's different with Bella. He is fond of her, but *this*? He gave Sirius his family ring! When he talks of Sirius, he looks- I have never heard that man speak that way of anyone. Not even at school. Oh, and he very much enjoys speaking of Sirius, asks questions about him, useless things that can be of no use in war."

"Is it aware of the significance of giving away his signet ring?" Perhaps the animal doesn't know, what with its terrible upbringing.

"I don't know." Cygnus looks frustrated.

He always was, since he could crawl. Not an heir, not even a spare. The spare's spare. Cygnus grew up with something to prove, with resentment for his older brother and his older cousin. Awful temper that he has, he took it out on his sister, and, later, on his wife and daughters.

He might have resented Orion, and Alphard, but he never strayed. Jealous he might have been, but Cygnus is loyal to his family. Always.

When Riddle started causing problems, when he came back dressed in raw, *uncivilised* power, no one was sure who's side he was on. If he truly was willing to fight for purebloods, or if he'd turn against them.

"Keep an eye on him," Orion told Cygnus, and Cygnus did just that. He lowers himself in that beast's company, privy to his plans.

"He is not our friend," he advised Orion, a couple of years later. *"Not an enemy, not yet, but not a friend."*

Many meetings were held in those years. What to do about this self-styled lord? Some voted to assassinate him- Arcturus was in that crowd. But the younger ones- Orion, Abraxas, Yaxley, Mulciber, Cygnus, they weren't as keen.

Orion was doubtful they could kill him. *"And if we try and fail, then we will certainly make him an enemy."*

Abraxas thought they could use Riddle to weaken the Ministry, throw him at Dumbledore, like an aggressive dog, to do their work for them.

In the end, Arcturus deferred to them- they knew Riddle, after all. Went to school with it. And the creature was causing the Ministry all sorts of trouble, even early on, when civil war was not something most people imagined would take place.

But then Riddle got to their young- to their heirs, to their futures. Riddle made sure its success or demise was now linked with those young boys he enchanted, marked like cattle. It made sure it would not be backstabbed, later on, when it will no longer be useful, when Dumbledore and the mudblood loving Ministry finally fall.

Even Cygnus talks highly of it, these days. Cygnus is no fool, he is loyal to family, but year after year his respect for that orphan, East London born and raised *filth*, grows.

Sometimes Arcturus has to remind Cygnus, *"It took your daughter, uses her like a shield, making a mockery of us, and our traditions."*

Even then, Cygnus seethes in anger, but he still respects.

And now, now it got its claws into Sirius. Bella was bad enough, but Sirius is far more valuable. Sirius is the head of house Black, whether he accepts it or not. Sirius has power, political power that Bella never will dream of.

Riddle must know what Arcturus knows. Riddle might have branded Lucius, but Lucius will always serve family, first. And Abraxas- oh, Abraxas and Lucius plot together, always united, no matter how much they can't stand the other. Riddle is aware that if Abraxas demands it, Lucius will always obey his father.

Yaxley plays along, benefits from Riddle's work, approves of it and fights with that brand on his arm. Yet Yaxley, too, will put his family, his name, first.

Most of them will. Riddle only has Lestrange's unwavering loyalty, but that's just one family, out of Twenty-Eight.

Yet if it gets Sirius, a Black, the head of the first family, the most noble and ancient, then other heirs might stand by Sirius.

And Sirius- that boy proved he's willing to abandon his family, even if he loves all his relatives. He left them, once, he has strange ideas about what 'honour' means.

Riddle managed to break the hold Dumbledore and those mudblood loving fools had on Sirius. And in such a short time, too. Even Orion couldn't get Sirius to hate Dumbledore.

"I like him," Sirius insisted. *"He's powerful and smart and funny."*

"He hates our way of life; he hates who we are," Orion cautioned him, but Sirius would say *'he doesn't hate me, he's always nice to everyone'*.

Of course, Sirius was only twelve, no doubt he saw the real Dumbledore later on, but he was still loyal to that pretentious half-blood, willing to risk his life for Dumbledore's cause, fought against Bella and childhood friends on the battlefield.

Until Riddle. In less than a year, Riddle got Sirius away from that crowd, so seamlessly, even Sirius probably can't pinpoint the moment it happened.

“Yaxley alluded that they have an…intimate relationship,” Cygnus sneers. “And, I must say, if Sirius is wearing the Gaunt ring, then- yet I didn’t suspect Sirius finds men appealing. Quite the opposite. As bad as-” he trails off, before he can say ‘Orion' and risk Arcturus’ displeasure. “It’s not something I would accuse Voldemort of, usually, but I am starting to wonder if he…gave Sirius something.”

“Unlikely.”

Riddle has never resorted to bedding anyone to reach its goals. And it was handsome, back in the day, filth disguised by aristocratic features. Yet it never had a lover, not one Cygnus or Yaxley or Arcturus could find, at least.

“But Sirius is- he never shied away from his affairs, he has no shame; if he liked men, surely we’d have heard about it. Especially when he was with those tolerant morons.”

Sirius was, indeed, too interested in girls, since he was alarmingly young.

Orion’s influence, probably. He’d take Sirius along when he enjoyed a week or two with his whores.

Arcturus never talked of it; unthinkable, to him, for a man to step outside his wedding vows, and so *publicly*, at that. He would have harshly judged anyone for it, like he judged Abraxas when he kept a mistress while his wife still lived.

But Orion- he gave Orion some leeway, since the wife in question was Walburga.

Oh, he wanted to say *‘I told you not to marry her, but you insisted, now look where it got you’*. It’s Arcturus’ own failing; he shouldn’t have allowed it, no matter how Orion begged for her hand. But Orion was so in love with her, he threatened to run away if he didn’t get her. Sensible, obedient Orion, that never set a foot out of boundaries, had lost his mind, and Arcturus gave his permission and then lived to regret it.

So he said nothing to Orion when the whores started appearing at their country manor. He didn’t even say *‘what would your mother think, if she could see you now?’*

Because the whores only appeared once Melania was dead. Oh, she hated Walburga, too, like anyone else in the family. Except Pollux, but then fathers always have a soft spot for their daughters, even errant daughters. She hated Walburga, for how much pain she was causing Orion and Sirius, but she’d have thrown such a fit if she’d have heard Orion was unfaithful.

Worst of all, Orion seemed amused when Sirius would kiss someone’s daughter, causing scandals and upsetting fathers all over Europe.

Oh, how upset Abbot was, how *embarrassing*, when an elf found Sirius kissing his daughter in a broom closet.

When Abbot screamed about it, Orion reminded him he was screaming at a Black, and suggested he minded his tone.

"You don't shove girls into broom closets, Sirius," he said, once Abbot and his red-cheeked girl left.

"She shoved me into the closet!" Sirius said, indignant, and Orion laughed. He was always too lax with Sirius. He did teach the boy not to go too far with well-bred girls, not to taint them before marriage, but he ignored Sirius sleeping with mudbloods at Hogwarts.

Everyone knew Sirius was interested in girls. But not many knew about that boy, that Rosier. Arcturus would not have found out either, if not for Walburga, who came to complain to him.

"Orion doesn't seem to care, but you should. I don't want Sirius turning into Alphard. Talk to him, or do something about it."

Walburga was always so dramatic. It was obvious to anyone else that they would have no trouble marrying Sirius off, that he most likely would give House Black many children, what with his appetites. If he kept some male company outside of it, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. But she made such a scene, Orion confessed, when Arcturus asked about it- and no one could throw a tantrum quite like Walburga. No doubt, she traumatised Sirius, like she traumatised him in so many different ways, to the point where Sirius was never seen even looking at a boy.

Yet certainly this isn't new, as Cygnus seems to think; Riddle didn't trick him into that, Arcturus is sure. It's just an unfortunate inclination Sirius was born with. Better than Alphard, in any case, who only favoured men, ran from women as if they burned.

It isn't even new information that Sirius enjoys the company of unhinged creatures. He always loved Bellatrix, and some of the affairs the magazines reported- oh, Arcturus knows some of those girls were missing a few marbles.

"Don't tell Walburga," he commands. Gods know, if Walburga hears of it, she'll make everything worse. This is a matter that requires subtlety, careful handling, and Walburga is similar to the asteroid belt she was named after. Truly, what was Pollux thinking, naming her like that? Of course she'd grow up destructive. Names have power.

Cygnus makes a face. "When have I ever told her anything?"

Indeed, it was unfair of Arcturus to even bring it up.

Though he does spend a minute on a silly fantasy, imagining Walburga finding out, marching to Riddle and cursing the beast. Arcturus holds her in no regard, but she's the only one crazy enough, that in a fit of rage she wouldn't care about Riddle's power, she'd just care it is defiling her first born.

"What does Bellatrix think about it?" Another crazy one, prone to rage. So much like Walburga, it is as if she were her daughter.

Arcturus hears she killed Sirius' previous woman, in a fit of jealousy. If only she would kill Riddle, too, driven by that same undue possessiveness over her cousin.

Sirius wanted to wed her, but Orion learned from his own mistakes and forbade it. Even Walburga was against it, and she adored Bellatrix back then.

“She’s in denial,” Cygnus huffs. “She refuses to talk about it. She insists that Voldemort gives tokens of affection to his most loyal, that he gave her something, too. Yet I told her this is not some vase, it’s a family ring. She said ‘her lord’ doesn’t put any value in our ‘stupid traditions’ and is probably unconcerned with the significance.”

Arcturus snorts. That could be. But- “Sirius is certainly aware of the implications. And yet he is wearing the ring.”

Cygnus sighs. “I can’t blame her; I don’t want to believe it either.”

“We must.” They’re not women, to close their eyes to unpleasant realities, be shielded from them. No matter how much they’d like to not believe it, they must always be aware of reality.

“What can we do about it?” Cygnus asks. “You know how stubborn Sirius-”

“Mentioning this to him, let alone speaking against it, will only make him dig his heels in. No. There’s nothing we can do to stop it. However, we can determine if it is something we can use. Perhaps this creature truly has some base, animal like affection for-”

“He’s a man,” Cygnus says, jaws working. “Stop that. I know it must take an effort to refer to him as an ‘it’ at all times, and for what?”

“It *is* an it, and no effort at all,” Arcturus speaks over him, and Cygnus rolls his eyes but shuts up. “And if it likes Sirius, then we can work with that. We simply have to draw Sirius back to us, marry him off, make him like us again. Patience- we need patience. Eventually, if Riddle wins the war, it would be in our benefit if it wants to please Sirius, as long as we can make sure *we* influence what pleases Sirius.”

“He’s like Walburga- impossible to be patient around him.”

“You must be.”

“He *stabbed* me, I’ll remind you.”

“You cursed his mother, Cygnus. I’d have stabbed you, too- well, no, I would have cursed you, I would have killed you for that, but Sirius was only sixteen.”

What a mess- as soon as Orion fell sick, the family fell apart. No voice of reason to keep them together. No strength to keep them all in check.

“He’s goading me with that little half-blood,” Cygnus snarls. “He brings her to places he knows I frequent, waiting for a reaction.”

“And you must give it. Go to them. Make him happy.”

“If I sit at a table with that half-blood, it would tell people I accept her. That I recognise her presence, her birth, thus the marriage of the traitor with the mudblood.”

Cygnus still loves Andromeda, like Arcturus still loves Lucretia. *Fathers and daughters,* he thinks.

But Andromeda's sins are far greater than Lucretia's. Far, far greater.

And if Lucretia's children are no Blacks, even pureblooded, then certainly a half-blood has no place in their family.

Yet, she's a girl. She's no threat to their name or their line. An exception could be made if it's that important to Sirius.

"We're trying to show Sirius that family is what matters most. That we stick by each other. So if he considers this girl family, you must tolerate it."

Cygnus looks pained, for a second, before his face smoothes out. It will be difficult, of course, especially since Arcturus is told that the girl looks greatly like Bellatrix and Andromeda.

"Fine," Cygnus agrees, teeth clenched together. "Now, make that elf brew me a cup of perfect tea."

Arcturus goes to the kitchen instead of calling Tessuth. It wouldn't do to have Cygnus witness Arcturus having to ask her nicely.

It's Cygnus' fault; Tessuth is perfectly happy and obedient most of the time, but Cygnus treats her badly and Tessuth is too old to put up with it. She's free, too, even if she might not be aware of it.

He likes her free; Arcturus always did things by the books. He was a good son, he observed all their traditions, he married who he was told, provided his house with an exemplary heir. All his long life, he acted the way he was expected to act, he honoured his family.

Yet when his father died, it was a little way to rebel, though such a strange time to act out, when he had his own grown children, even grandchildren.

Still, when he realised he forgot to bind her to him, and decided to keep her that way, he felt a thrill.

He feels it every time he sees her.

(-)

Voldemort suggested Sirius shouldn't wear the ring all the time, that such a dark artefact is sure to have side-effects.

It's not only the process itself that is insanely complicated, separating a piece of one's self and transferring it to an object- the spells that guard the vessel are even more complicated.

Amongst a Horcrux' many defence mechanisms, possession reigns supreme. But that should only happen if Voldemort dies- well, if he loses his body.

The magic woven with the Horcrux becomes unstable then, at its most defensive.

Voldemort is perfectly alive, so Sirius doesn't think there's any reason to fear possession.

Besides, he's an Occlumenes; surely he could detect any influence the Horcrux would try to exert over him.

"I'm too smart to get possessed, anyway," he tells Voldemort, who laughs, actually *laughs*, the jerk.

And where would he leave the ring, anyway? It holds something far too precious, more valuable than any gem. What, he's supposed to leave Voldemort's soul in a drawer, somewhere? Insanity. Who would do that?

Voldemort, apparently. He left one in a cold, dark cave, and he gave the other to Sirius Black, Temper Extraordinaire.

Sirius wears it, at all times. Well, he takes it off when he visits his mother, because she might recognise it. Voldemort said he wore the ring when he was at Hogwarts; Sirius also takes it off when he sees his grandfather, because as lost to history as the Gaunts are, his grandfather would recognise their coat of arms. Sirius still has it on his person on those occasions, puts it on a golden chain and hides it under his robe, the cold weight of it pleasant on Sirius' chest.

Other than that, he loves seeing it on his finger. It feels like Voldemort is with him now, at all times.

The Dark Mark is similar, also a piece of Voldemort's magic forever branded on Sirius' skin, but the ring is obviously *more*.

He catches himself staring at it, often, when he's not with Voldemort.

"That's hideous," James remarks, awakening a flash of anger in Sirius. Which is...rare, to put it mildly. He can count on one hand the number of times James angered him, and he'd still have fingers left.

At least James was never one to study 'stuffy pureblood stuff' as he puts it, so he doesn't connect the Deathly Hallows symbol with the Gaunts, just thinks Sirius likes the Hallows.

"What are those, then?" Lily asks, curious.

Sirius and James share a shocked look- who doesn't know what the Deathly Hallows are? Every child knows that story!

"That's it!" Sirius exclaims. "I'll be in charge of reading bedtime stories to baby Potter."

Lily laughs and tells them some muggle fairytales she can't wait to share with the baby. They sound ridiculous.

"You can't read that to the kid!" Sirius insists.

"Why not?"

"Because the 'witches' in all those stories are absolutely terrible! They're always mean and cursing the muggle heroines into all sorts of terrible situations! Not to mention that deranged one that *ate kids*!"

Truly, muggles are bonkers. All of them. What an odd fairytale.

"Oh." Lily frowns. "Oh, I didn't think of it this way."

"I'm surprised you accepted to come to Hogwarts if this is what you thought witches are."

She laughs, rubbing her stomach, bigger and bigger every week, seems like. "To be honest, I was a little concerned, but then Severus assured me..." she trails off.

James makes a face, thoroughly disgusted any time Lily mentions Snape.

In any case, Sirius decides he'll shelter the baby from crazy muggle stories.

Thankfully, he doesn't need to worry about that with Draco.

His room is ready, already. *Both* his rooms.

Narcissa shows him the nursery, first, big enough to house fifteen kids. It looks better than Grimmauld's nursery. There are no skulls anywhere, to begin with. The walls are pristine white, with only some moving clouds here and there, fluffy and cute.

The crib is positively royal, wrought with goblin silver, charmed with no less than eighty-two spells. There are toys on the shelves that Draco won't be able to use for at least a couple of years.

The second room is the one Draco will get when he's too old for the nursery; the age depends, from child to child.

Sirius was sent to his own room before he can even remember it. He can only remember his bed always felt too big for him, that four-poster monstrosity; he had little stairs at the foot of the bed to climb on it, and it felt so unsafe, like a hundred monsters could hide under that vast blanket.

No wonder he'd always run off to his father's room. Or, waddle to his father's room, initially, he supposes.

"You went a bit overboard with the green," Sirius notices.

She rolls her eyes. “Lucius.” That one word is enough to explain the situation. “Worry not, I’ll renovate it eventually, but he got so excited, I let him pick this for the moment.”

The room is still very tasteful, but it screams Slytherin.

“What if he’s a Ravenclaw?” Sirius asks Lucius, over dinner. He knows better than to mention Gryffindor, or, gods forbid, Hufflepuff.

“If he grows up staring at Slytherin House crests everywhere, he won’t be a Ravenclaw, will he now?” Lucius counters.

Sirius is really vital for these two charges of his, it’s clear. Baby Potter needs shielding from muggle insanity, and Draco needs shielding from Lucius insanity.

“You sound like Abraxas,” Sirius says, carefully, but someone has to say it, for Draco’s sake.

Lucius almost *flinches*. “Father told me that if I get sorted anywhere else, I won’t be returning home. I won’t be saying that to Draco, but it can’t hurt for him to have little hints here and there.”

“And if he gets sorted into Ravenclaw?”

A muscle jumps in Lucius’ jaw. “Then I’ll change the damn carpet to blue, though it will crash horribly with bronze. Truly, was Rowena blind when she came up with that awful colour combination?” He glares at Sirius. “Why don’t you shut up and return to staring at that ring of yours, in silent contemplation?”

Of course Lucius knows whose ring it is, after having seen Voldemort wearing it for the past many years.

“What is it with that ring?” Narcissa’ delicate nose is upturned. “It’s not very...pretty.”

“New topics,” Sirius announces.

Lucius agrees.

He never mentions the ring again, he doesn’t stare at it, either.

Lucius was always very wise.

Unlike Rodolphus, who, in meetings, glares at the ring, then at Sirius, then at Voldemort. Voldemort glares back and then Rodolphus sighs, as he’s prone to do lately.

Most worrisome is Bella’s reaction- that is to say, her *lack* of reaction. When she first sees the ring, her face goes blank. Bella is not known for being sensible, she never could keep a blank face, quick to voice her opinions. Now, she says *nothing*, and it makes Sirius’ stomach twist with discomfort.

Voldemort doesn’t seem to mind Sirius wearing the ring to the meetings, which obviously implies things, since all the people in that circle had seen Voldemort with it, first.

Sirius waits, hostile, for someone to say something about it, but no one does, not even Rabastan- though he stops asking why Sirius isn't sleeping around anymore.

Sirius wonders if Voldemort understands what giving away a family ring means. It almost never happens, heavily frowned upon, but there were instances in the past where two heads of house or two heirs took up with one another. A proper wizarding family is united under a single name. It's what makes a family, what builds a legacy- all members united under one name.

In the only two occasions Sirius can recall from history of such odd families, one of the men needed to abandon his family name, to take his partner's. He would also give away his family ring to his partner.

But he doubts Voldemort knows of such things; many times he looks surprised at the insanely complicated customs of the Twenty Eight. Sirius doesn't bother informing him, and he has a feeling no one else in the inner circle would dare approach the subject with him.

(-)

Sirius wakes up one morning to see Voldemort standing by the edge of his bed, holding Tom Riddle's picture, the only thing to have survived Sirius' redecoration efforts after Marlene's death. Well, that and his Death Eater mask and robe, safely locked away in his nightstand, under blood wards.

They're spending a few days at Sirius' house, while Voldemort's goes through its own redecoration process.

Voldemort is putting it back together again, after he tore it down in the house-elf debacle. He says he found a way to keep elves away. Sirius does not want to imagine how he did that, in case he managed it, or he doesn't want to argue that it's impossible to achieve, in case Voldemort is simply deluding himself into thinking he found a solution.

Whatever happened, the cabin is supposed to be ready soon.

Sirius jumps from his bed- one Voldemort transfigured from gods know what, because he refused to sleep on just a mattress- and snatches the picture out of Voldemort's hand.

Just in time, he thinks. Judging by Voldemort's face, the picture would have met a tragic end in the next few seconds if Sirius hadn't acted.

"How did you get my blood?" Sirius asks, holding the picture behind his back, to protect it.

Voldemort shouldn't have been able to open that drawer without Sirius' blood. Not without destroying it, at least.

He doesn't answer. Not that it would have been hard for Voldemort to get hold of Sirius' blood, what with how often Sirius bleeds around him.

Voldemort walks away, visibly angry. On his way to the door, he catches his own reflection in the mirror on the bathroom's wall.

He stops for a second, glares at himself, before his face rearranges itself into a calm expression.

Does it reassure him, to see how different he looks from the boy in the picture?

Or does he regret it?

No way to find out. Sirius lets him leave without a word, as to not endanger Tom Riddle's picture. Voldemort seemed volatile for a second, and Sirius does not want the picture destroyed.

He's relieved when, a few days later, they can go back to Voldemort's house.

"Go on, call your elf," Voldemort demands, seated behind his desk, a cup of tea between his long fingers.

"Really, there's no need-"

"Call it. I can see you doubt my success."

Sirius sighs. He does doubt. On one hand, he wants to be proven wrong, since it matters so much to Voldemort.

On the other, he wants to be proven right, because- well, just because.

"Dobby," he calls.

Nothing happens.

"Dobby!"

Still no sign of the little blighter. Voldemort smirks, so satisfied with himself.

"Nothing is impossible for Lord Voldemort," he says, leaning back on his chair. "Even if wizard-kind never found a solution, grew complacent, dependent on elves, that doesn't mean a solution is impossible, Sirius."

What a brilliant mind.

Just as Sirius prepares to tell him not to look so smug, he talks again.

"I am grateful, however, that you brought the issue to my attention. I can solve anything, but first I need to be aware there's a problem to begin with."

When Sirius asks Dobby why he didn't come when called, Dobby cries- he's still so sensitive- apologising over and over again. Sirius has to hold him by the shoulders so Dobby won't smash his head against Grimmauld's umbrella stand.

"Dobby doesn't know, Master! Dobby simply couldn't!"

When Sirius tries calling for Tessuth, when he's alone in Voldemort's house, she doesn't come, either. But, unlike Dobby, she should know why she couldn't. She's far, far, far older.

He Apparates to his grandfather's house, to find her in a frenzy, armed with a *sword*, of all things, screaming at his grandfather that Sirius was taken captive by goblins and they need to save him.

"There he is, Tessuth," his grandfather exclaims, irritated, when Sirius enters. "I told you, the war is long over. Stop with this nonsense!"

Tessuth looks so confused, still clinging to the sword she must have snatched from one of the statues guarding his grandfather's office.

"But that was filthy goblin magic," she mutters. "Master called, and Tessuth tried to go, but goblin magic wouldn't let her!"

Huh. He used goblins, in one way or another. Sirius doubts the goblin was willing. They wouldn't willingly share their secrets with wizards, never had.

"I didn't summon you, Tessuth," Sirius lies, pretending to be as exasperated with her as his grandfather is. "You imagined it. The war is truly over."

She blinks a few times before she puts the sword down. "Did we win?" she asks. "Tessuth can't remember."

"We won," his grandfather informs her, patting her head and sending her to make them tea.

Wizards won, for sure. It will never cease to surprise him how elves consider that as a win for them, too, when the ones that lost the war were their siblings.

(-)

Sirius feels less and less inclined to leave Voldemort's house. He feels so good there, so unburdened, away from the war, death and despair happening outside.

The sex is better than ever, especially as Sirius learns, slowly, that he doesn't need to be in charge of it.

He accepts that even when Voldemort is pinned down under him, even if Sirius is on top, he doesn't feel one bit in control.

Yet it doesn't bother him as much as it used to. It stopped frustrating Sirius.

Somehow, he learned to find some freedom in this complete lack of control he experiences around Voldemort. It comes, at least in his mind, with a lack of any kind of responsibility. He's not in charge, so he's not responsible for anything that could go wrong.

He's aware it is a flawed logic, but every day it's easier to just eliminate any sort of caution around Voldemort, since caution won't help him much, anyway.

He can't quite believe he ever even tried, that there was a time where Sirius tried- not always managed, but at least *tried*- to keep his mouth shut, to take care what words he chose, just so he won't completely piss off Voldemort.

These days, he says whatever crosses his mind. At first, he does it on purpose, *testing*, still trying to break Voldemort's facade of patience, this collected and calm illusion he's trying to project.

But Voldemort doesn't break. If he's that dedicated to maintaining a falsehood, or if he simply is that calm and understanding, Sirius isn't sure.

When finally the opportunity reveals itself for a fight, a proper fight, or at least something that Sirius does his best to turn into one, he puts on his most obnoxious sneer as he spits whatever he imagines would annoy Voldemort the most.

It's about muggleborns, and Sirius pushes and prods. Even when he's defeated with logical, cold answers, he simply changes his stance, arguing a different point of view.

Ha, he thinks. *I've got him!* It's a tactic he knows well, from his fights with his mother, where they both just derailed into *nonsense*, arguing and saying things they didn't even believe in, just anger and venom. Sirius can't be defeated when he's irrational, after all-

Except he *is* defeated.

In the middle of the fight, as Sirius gets nastier and nastier, as Voldemort's jaw twitches rather attractively, and his fingers visibly itching for his wand, Voldemort just disappears.

Pops out of existence without a sound, leaving Sirius mid sentence.

Which only makes Sirius angrier, of course, but only momentarily.

As the anger passes, he's impressed by the efficiency of the tactic. It never occurred to him this would be a way to stop his hours long fights with his mother.

That he could just …leave. Remove himself from the situation. It was unthinkable, because Blacks don't back down from a fight.

When Voldemort returns, hours later, calm as ever, Sirius is calm, too, and they don't even need to address it.

He's determined to do it when next he fights with his mum. Simply fuck off and end it, preferably before it gets too painful.

There are no fights with Voldemort; Sirius would have to make an effort to manufacture one, and it won't work, apparently. Otherwise they don't occur naturally.

Most things that people find irritating about Sirius, Voldemort finds amusing. Even when he does seem a tad ticked off on occasion, he manages to redirect the conversation with ease.

Sirius just has to let him. He doesn't need to worry about it. About *anything.*

It truly is freeing, simply being himself, with no filter, no concern of saying either mudblood (in case James is close) or muggleborn (in case his family is close). There is no need to pay attention and monitor parts of himself the way he has to when he's around every other single person on this planet.

Even with Bella, in the good days, before Marlene- even she would get annoyed with him at some point, they had fights- rare enough, but when they happened, they grew heated.

For a dark lord, for a warlord, it's fascinating how non confrontational Voldemort is around Sirius. For a man that supposedly possesses a short temper ('shorter than ever these days' Rabastan said with a shudder) he seems willing enough to navigate Sirius' moods successfully.

It's not just that; it's also the tender way in which he looks at Sirius; the smile, soft and real. The gentle touches. It's the meals he cooks for Sirius, or the way he says his name, like its something precious, like it's a spell only he knows.

It's in the patience, the *extraordinary* patience he demonstrates when dealing with Sirius, the way he never belittles him, never judges him.

He often mentions Sirius is young, but never in a way that implies Sirius is stupid. It's just a fact. Sirius is young, and Voldemort understands that, understands their difference in age and experience will colour their perceptions.

He even agrees that one is never old enough to stop learning. That he can stand corrected. It's in the way he accepts Sirius can teach him stuff he never knew.

No other older man with power and authority ever said that to Sirius, ever listened to Sirius without dismissing him.

It's a part of his soul, given to Sirius for safekeeping.

All these things make Voldemort's company beyond special. A unique experience Sirius found nowhere else in his life.

A true understanding, a true lack of judgement, a willingness to suffer Sirius' sometimes rapidly shifting moods, like no one ever did before him.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius says, once, and with so much ease, he who never could apologise properly, because Blacks do not apologise. But he does, because once he calms down from a fit of misplaced anger that plagued him all his life, he feels *guilty*. He feels guilty because Voldemort just let him be, did not take the bait, did not let himself get riled up.

“No matter,” Voldemort dismisses it. “It is a natural thing to lash out when you are angry, Sirius. I do it often. We all do it.”

Yet he never lashes out at Sirius.

(-)

Sirius is usually the first one to close his eyes and his mind, but it happens occasionally that he wakes during the night, and almost a different man sleeps beside him.

He looks younger, what with that brilliant mind resting, the burdens it must carry gone. Less tense, face slack, shoulder relaxed.

He’s far less threatening without the red gaze to stare people down.

Tom Riddle looks vulnerable, human, and beautiful. But it never lasts long- Voldemort must feel, somehow, that he’s being watched, even if Sirius makes sure to lie still and quiet, to the point of holding his breath. But Voldemort wakes, anyway, no state of confusion between unconscious and fully conscious.

He drags Sirius to him, coils back around him, and remains awake until Sirius falls back asleep.

Voldemort has nightmares, sometimes, Sirius learns, as they spend more and more nights together.

Sirius never considered it. In all his musings about Voldemort, all the time he used to spend imagining Voldemort and his habits, what he does with his time, how he sleeps, if he sleeps at all, it never crossed Sirius’ mind that the terrible dark lord would have nightmares.

The burst of magic is so potent that Sirius wakes abruptly, only to see Voldemort sitting up, breathing hard, staring ahead.

Sirius tries to touch him; mind bleary with sleep, he does what comes instinctively: he tries to comfort Voldemort.

He is launched off the bed and into the wall before he can even discern what is going on.

He cracks his ribs, and his groan of pain snaps Voldemort out of his trance, his red eyes alert once more.

He gets out of bed, and picks Sirius off the floor, heals his wounds.

They never talk about it.

When it happens again, Voldemort bolting upright from his sleep, breathing hard, Sirius knows better than to touch him, remains motionless on his side, eyes closed, until the distressed magic retreats and Voldemort quietly leaves the room, not to return for the night.

Sirius can't even fathom what nightmares a man like him must get. He's not one to be bothered by his victims, that's for sure.

There's *fear* in the magic that surrounds Voldemort when he has these episodes; accidental magic, that usually only happens to little kids or when an adult wizard is in great distress.

Who, or what, is scary enough to frighten Voldemort?

Sirius hopes he never encounters such an entity.

His own nightmares are rarer these days. Parkinson stopped bothering him, the poor muggles Rodolphus and the other psychos toyed with in that forest are long faded from his memory, he can't even remember their faces.

He usually can't remember his dreams at all. He sleeps well, if Voldemort doesn't have a nightmare to wake him.

The only nightmare he has is…not quite a nightmare, or at least it's not violent or filled with blood.

He dreams his father came back to life- it's unclear how, but he's alive, and Sirius is back home, and everything is right in the world.

Except, of course, Sirius can't be with Voldemort anymore. His father doesn't approve at all, no matter how much Sirius begs.

So Sirius goes to Voldemort's house, with a heavy heart. He's sad, and he feels guilty for being sad, because he has his father back! He should only feel joy.

"We have to break up," Sirius says.

Voldemort lifts his gaze from his book. Their eyes meet. "No," he says, softly, and goes back to reading.

It makes Sirius' skin prickle with unease. "We can't see each other anymore," he insists. "I'm sorry. I'm leaving."

"No. No, you aren't," Voldemort repeats.

And Sirius can't leave. All the doors disappear, and he knows he will never get out, that he can't get out-

He wakes with a jolt, unsettled. After he brushes his teeth, he finds Voldemort at his desk, reading, as always.

Sirius stops in the doorway, remembers the casual 'no' from the dream. Causal, whispered softly, but indomitable.

It's not as if Sirius wants to leave- he doesn't. Voldemort is the best thing that ever happened to him since his father fell ill.

But there is a sense of foreboding when Sirius remembers this man has the power to overrule anything; that he cannot be refused or abandoned.

(-)

When Cygnus eventually shows his face at the restaurant, after avoiding it for a few weeks, no doubt informed of Sirius' presence, he strolls to his private booth, right past Sirius and Dora, without a glance sent their way.

Or so it appears. Sirius knows he must have looked. He *must* have. Otherwise, he wouldn't have come.

"Oh, wow," Dora whispers. "Is that your dad? You look so much like him."

"No," Sirius says, making a face. "Eat your cake."

No one breathes in the restaurant, all eyes on them, until Cygnus disappears in his private booth.

Then the whispers start. Someone even takes *bets*.

"He'll forever ignore them," Mr Greengrass says.

"He came, though, even knowing Sirius brought the girl here," Mr Nott argues. "He didn't have them thrown out-"

"Yet!"

"He'll cave," Mr Abbot says, certain. "Cygnus always had a soft spot for those girls of his."

"Soft?" someone else chokes with laughter. "*Cygnus*?"

"Well, as soft as a Black can get-"

"A Black is still here," Sirius hisses, turning towards them, startling an oblivious Dora who was prattling about chocolate frogs' cards. "So mind your fucking business."

Nott rolls his eyes, Greengrass smirks. They shut up, but they don't fear Sirius as much as they fear Cygnus. They wouldn't have dared talk so freely in Cygnus' hearing.

It's not fear, Voldemort whispers in his ear. *It's respect. They respect Cygnus. They don't respect you.*

Sirius shakes his head, annoyed.

(-)

The first part of the dinner is silent as a grave. It would be, with his grandfather there.

He sits in Sirius' father's chair, at the head of the table, that is usually left free, whenever Sirius eats at home. He knows it's left free even when he's not there, when it's just his brother and mother.

Sirius' jaws hurt from clenching them that hard, to stop himself from yelling at his grandfather to get out of that chair.

After the first course, his grandfather starts talking about potential brides for Sirius.

He nods, listens, tried hard not to cause a scene, to have a normal fucking dinner for once. Regulus offers him a quick, small smile, thanking him for his efforts.

All in vain, of course. His mother can never help herself.

"Perhaps she doesn't want him," she says, when his grandfather speaks of a woman.

"If she doesn't, she can say 'no', and we shall find another," his grandfather answers, without pause, without ire.

She stares at him, hate gathering in her eyes. "You won't find many women able to say 'no'. A woman saying 'no' in these circles is the biggest crime one can commit, the most egregious. You lot don't like hearing 'no'. You ignore it, and then punish us for daring to have uttered it."

It triggers something inside Sirius, the way only she can manage.

Hundreds of memories assault him at once, her vitriol, her screams at his father, her accusations.

Men are awful, men are beasts, men are *that* and *this* and the *other*, and Sirius was sat there for it all, at seven years old, at eleven, at twelve, at thirteen, thinking 'you have two sons', thinking 'I am a man, too', never daring to say it.

Sometimes it made him wonder if she hated him just for that, just because he was born with a cock, but then she loves Regulus, so it can't be that.

"Funny," he snarls. "I remember you saying 'no' every fucking day of my life. I remember you screaming at Father, throwing tantrums, pushing him away. And yet I remember no punishments. I remember he spoiled you, gave you everything you asked, surrounding you with flowers and jewellery. I remember you getting in his face, yelling like a deranged banshee, but I don't ever remember him raising his voice to you, or insulting you, the way you always insulted him."

Regulus closes his eyes beside her, in resignation. His shoulder hunch.

She goes red, shock and indignation all over her face, and for a moment Sirius feels a sick satisfaction at riling her up, but then, as always, he feels pain. He understands he won nothing, he understands she'll hurt him back, in just a moment.

As soon as he stops talking, she'll start, so he keeps going.

"Your father treated you like a princess, too. Even today, he'll come running if you asked him. He has the patience of saints, dealing with you. So what the fuck are you on about, Mother? What man 'punished' you, huh? Who hurt you so much that you decided to hate all of us in return, even your own sons? Did you ever consider what it did to m- Regulus, growing up hearing how awful he is just because he's a man, huh? No, I bet you never thought of it, because nothing and no one matters, no one but you and your spite!"

She stands abruptly; the tablecloth snags, shifts, and goblets spill over.

"You have no idea what Orion did, who he truly was! Your precious father, your hero, he was nothing but a-"

"Shut up."

For a second, it's like having his father back; that soft tone, that powerful presence at the head of the table.

Though, his father never looked at his mother the way his grandfather does it right then. With hate. *Pure* hate. Sirius' father was never violent with them, but the same cannot be said about Arcturus Black.

Sirius well remembers the feeling of a belt falling harshly on his arse, even if it was so long ago, even if it was only a couple of times.

But even then, his grandfather wasn't this angry. He was composed, not even showing irritation at Sirius, just delivering a lesson. He called them 'teachable moments'.

He's angry now, staring daggers at Sirius' mother, more expressions on his face then …he can't ever remember this man being so expressive, wearing his feeling on his face.

"You are a disgrace," he hisses. "Always were. A failure of a daughter, a failure of a wife, a failure of a mother. Useless and hateful. The only mistake Orion ever made."

Her nostrils flare. “Oh, look at you, defending his honour. But you weren’t here when he was sick, were you? Your perfect son, your boy, you never brought him a glass of water, you never sat with him through the night as he was dying! Neither did you!” she spits at Sirius. “You loved him so much, yet when he needed you the most, you were nowhere to be found. It was me, his failure of a wife, his *mistake*, that took care of him.”

“Mother, please,” Regulus whispers.

She turns on him, swiftly. “You’re siding with them, now? Of course! Go ahead, traitor. You spineless little fool, always wanting their attention, trailing after them, content with any leftover they threw at you, ready to forget my devotion to you at the slightest sign these monsters will accept you into their little power hungry group. You’re just like them!“

Regulus takes it with a blank face, gives her no reaction. Sirius envies that kind of composure.

“Hateful, spiteful creature! I rue the day he married you!” Sirius truly never saw his grandfather this angry.

“I rue it, too, believe me!” she howls back.

“You didn’t deserve him!”

“He killed my daughter!”

His blood turns to ice, just like that. Regulus stiffens in his seat.

They both look around, scared, because their mother mentioned something that was *prohibited*, something that never happened, and no one is allowed to mention it. Surely, something horrible will happen any second now.

And then, the words register, not just her acknowledging that she once had a daughter, even if only for a few days.

No, he thinks. No. She’s lying. His father would *never.*

“How dare you?” His grandfather stands, a vein throbbing on his forehead. “You delusional harpy, how dare you say that?”

“I went to sleep, and she was still alive!” Tears and fury mix on her face, her hands curled into fists at her side. It’s as if the words burst out of her, as if she had repressed them her entire life, but now they come forth, encouraged by the great quantities of alcohol she consumed. “She was still alive! He took her while I slept, and I never saw her again! He killed her, because she wasn’t perfect, she was sick and frail and he couldn’t stand it!”

His grandfather takes out his wand, and Sirius is moving, even if it doesn’t feel like his mind is controlling his body.

He shields her with his body, and Regulus is there too. They’re trying to get her out of the room.

She slaps them, hurling insults at everyone, until Sirius finally manages to shove her out of the room, the doors closing behind her, the house obeying Sirius even if he didn't command it.

Before they shut completely, she grabs an ashtray from a table in the hallway, hurls it at his grandfather.

It explodes in mid-air, shatters upon meeting magic, right above Sirius' head.

"Is that true?" Sirius asks, voice weak, not turning around, staring at the shut doors, hearing his mother still screaming in the hallway. He can't see Regulus, so he must have left with her.

"Of course it's not true! The girl was beyond salvation! She would have died in the womb if it wasn't for Walburga's magic. As soon as she was out, she faded away, fast, but her magic was still entwined with Walburga's, sapping it away, draining her. The tie a mother has with a newborn child is incredibly strong. It was exhausting Walburga, killing her slowly, but she refused to let the child go! The Healers told us it's in vain, that the most we'd accomplish is bury Walburga with the girl, too. So Orion took her." His voice wavers. Sirius closes his eyes. A second passes, and when his grandfather speaks again, his voice sounds even weaker. "He said it isn't right for a Black to die without seeing the stars. So he took her outside, held her until dawn. She died in his arms. He buried her alone, he never complained about it, never blamed anyone. He took all of Walburga's vitriol over the years, and never said a word, and she dares- she *dares*-"

"It wasn't his choice to make!" His mother yells from the hallway. "It wasn't his choice! He never gave me a choice! He never asked me, anything, he just did it!"

"Because you'd have chosen to die with her, with no concern for the children you would have left behind! Oh, how I wish Orion would have let you die, because you were certainly of no use to the boys-"

"Enough!" Sirius turns, facing him. "That's enough."

"She's -"

"She's my mother," Sirius says, with finality.

His grandfather sneers, but he arranges his robe around him, straightens his back, hides behind his expressionless facade again.

"Orion defended her all his life. For all the good that it did him, in the end. A pity you decided to disobey him in all other ways, but it is in this folly that you follow his footsteps."

He Apparates away, leaving Sirius alone with shards of glass around him, wine slowly dripping on the floor, from knocked down goblets.

He'd like a smoke, but his fags are with Voldemort.

Just thinking about him makes Sirius want to *run* to him. To get away from this fucking house and all its pain, and flee to Voldemort, where it's good, and safe.

But he's not sixteen anymore. He's a grown man.

He doesn't feel like one, yet he is one, so with terror buried in his stomach, he goes to look for his mother, after he spends a few minutes on his own, trying to regain his bearings.

He finds her in the kitchen, drinking, Dobby at her side, petting her robe.

"Shh, Mistress. It's alright."

She's crying and Sirius' stomach rolls and turns, tightens with anxiety.

"Leave," he says, and Dobby vanishes.

He sits beside his mother, on her left. Because on her right, it's his father's chair. All around the house, his father's chairs remain empty, no one worthy enough to fill them, yet.

They sit in silence for a while. He doesn't drink. He can't. He's nauseous.

Several times he opens his mouth, but he doesn't know what to say, he's afraid he'll only make it worse, like he always does.

"He refused to tell me where he buried her," she says, eventually, when she stops crying. "Even Kreacher didn't know." She makes a harsh, broken sound, somewhere between anguish and cruel laughter. "If he even buried her. Perhaps he burned her or threw her in a lake-"

"He wasn't a monster," Sirius says, already getting angry with her again.

He can't help it. He *can't.*

"He was a good father." At least he tried. He always tried his best. Unlike her. "He didn't kill her. Why would you even say that, Mother? How can you say that?"

"I hope you won't ever lose a child," she snaps at him. "I hope no one will expect you to be reasonable, in case you do."

"He lost a child, too," Sirius says, strangled.

"He didn't care. He had you, his precious heir, he needn't another. If he cared, he wouldn't have taken her away from me like that. Like a thief, in the middle of the night. So easy it was for him-"

"How the fuck do you know it was easy?"

She meets his eyes. "Because he did it."

It's Sirius' turn to laugh, just as broken and harsh. She has no idea- what a life she must have lived, if she thinks people only do what comes easy to them.

“Grandfather said she’d have died, anyway, that she could have taken you along. He did what had to be done.”

“He never bother to explain it to me.” She looks away, in the distance, through the walls. “Only after. After I woke up and she was gone. He said he didn’t want me to be a part of that decision, so I wouldn’t have to carry that burden. As if I didn’t carry *that burden* for nine months, inside me.”

“He was trying to protect you-“

“He didn’t ask me to marry him, either. He informed Father, and Arcturus, asked their- *demanded*- their permission, and only after that he strolled up to me and told me we are to be married. He *never* asked. All those years, he did what he thought was best, without once asking me. Perhaps I’d have agreed. With most of it. Perhaps. I don’t know, because he took the choice from me. And I forgave him, time and time again, I forgave him, until I couldn’t anymore.”

“Why did he want to marry you?” Sirius asks, quietly. He does remember them being happy, once. Despite her protests that she never wanted to marry him. Once, she was happy, no matter what she says. Sirius *remembers* it.

She pours herself another cup. “It was my fault, apparently. At least that’s how Arcturus likes to tell it. I didn’t want to marry anyone. Father kept bringing me men, they sent me with Mother on a tour of Europe, to meet all sorts of idiots, until they all blurred together. I refused each and every one of them. I was getting *old*, so the pressure kept mounting, but Father still kept hope one day I’ll just miraculously fall in love with one of those clowns, that he won’t have to drag me down the aisle. Like an idiot, I moaned to Orion about it.” She huffs, makes a derisive sound. “He was my favourite cousin- he was my favourite person in the world. Stoic Orion, never complaining, always listening to all my woes, always understanding me. But that’s the issue- he wasn’t like me. I just wanted to rant, but he saw no purpose in ranting, about anything. He was …solution driven. So one day he said he’ll solve it. I ignored it- he was still at Hogwarts! In his last year. But that Yule he demanded my hand in marriage and well- Father was ready to refuse any other, when I begged him prettily, but no one refuses the heir of House Black. Not even other Blacks. Arcturus didn’t like it, but he couldn’t do anything about it. Orion was determined. He never went against his father’s wishes, but that time, it was clear he wasn’t backing down. I asked him ‘why’, too. Why he’d do such a thing, especially without asking me, first.” She swirls the wine in the cup, eyes a hundred miles away, lost in the past. “He said I was born a Black, and he’ll make sure I will die as one. That he won’t allow anyone else to have me, steal me away to some foreign Manor. That at least he can make sure my children will bear my name, too, not just my husband’s.”

She falls silent after that, and Sirius sits with her for a little while longer. He wishes he’d have his ring on his finger, so he could touch it. But it’s hidden under his robes, and Sirius can’t draw comfort from it.

(-)

“You are hurt,” Voldemort observes, as soon as Sirius enters the house. He stands, coming close.

Am I? Yeah, he is. The ashtray his mother threw, glass flying everywhere.

He’s relived; he thought the wetness he felt back then on his cheek was tears, but apparently it was just blood.

“No permanent damage,” Sirius brushes it off.

Voldemort’s eyes glint, a dangerous shadow playing on his features, but his fingers are soft and cooling when they brush over Sirius’ face, sealing the wound shut. “Everything they do to you is permanent damage. Every word, every sneer, every slap, every lesson they taught you.”

Sirius *flinches*, something small and pained inside his chest twisting in agreement.

He can’t bare it. He somehow stopped himself from crying all night, but Voldemort’s words bring him to a breaking point, and he feels he’ll break apart any second now.

If he starts crying, in front of Voldemort, of all people, Sirius would have to kill himself.

He walks away; he wants to run, wants to forget, to dull that visceral pain.

He wonders how Regulus deals with it; if he has to deal with it, or if he’s stronger than Sirius, if it doesn’t hurt him as much.

He turns into Padfoot, as soon as he’s out the door, and it instantly gets better; as his hearings heightens, his nose overwhelmed with scents from miles away, the intensity of his pain lessens, becomes simpler, a dull aching, no longer a knife twisting in his heart.

He hears the snakes nearby, pinpoints the second they become aware of him and stiffen in fear; he hears their scales brushing over grass a moment later.

Sirius barks, huffs.

“They always find me,” Voldemort said, exasperated, when they were practicing astral magic, laid on the grass, and Voldemort suddenly started hissing.

“Did you have a stroke?” Sirius mocks him, eyeing him carefully.

Voldemort rolls his eyes, bends and picks an adder from the grass, inches away from Sirius’ head.

“Oh.” Sirius immediately perks up, because- how many people get to hear a dead language?

A dead language, spoken under the stars, besides Sirius, using dead magic that only lives on in his veins.

Voldemort puts the adder down at his feet and hisses again, urging it to leave, presumably, since the snake slithers away.

"I can't fathom how they track me. Since I was a small boy, they always found me, everywhere I went, even in big cities."

"Well, can't you ask them?"

"They're not very bright. They say they just 'sense' me and lack the vocabulary to describe what they mean by it, what, exactly, they sense about me."

Padfoot runs after the snakes. Voldemort's family probably knew why snakes are drawn to them, seek them out from miles away. Knowledge, passed down, heir to heir, ancient magic disclosed to sons, in dark rooms, a secret just for them, guarded from outsiders.

Knowledge that never reached Voldemort.

It reminds Sirius to be grateful for his family, as it is. He knows them, he knows where he comes from, knows his history, his roots, doesn't have to wander blindly in the darkness, trying to piece it all together, to guess what part of him comes from who, and for what reason.

I mean you no harm, he tries to tell the snakes, when he catches up. But if Sirius can reassure other animals, with his body language, with his wagging tail, his lowered head, snakes react differently. Always so defensive.

They can't outrun him, so they are forced to stand their ground. They hiss, coils moving, hoods lowering, they strike the air around Sirius' face, lightening fast. Warnings, all warnings.

"It won't bite you, unless it has no other choice," his father told him, when they were at their country manor and they stumbled upon what Sirius perceived as an angry snake, trying to bite his ankle. *"It's not attacking you, it's warning you to stay away. It thinks you are attacking it. Snakes are reclusive, naturally shy, and their first form of defence is to move away from danger." His father grabs a stick. "But, if cornered, if provoked, they will strike."*

He pokes the snake, and this time it bites, fast, jaws sinking into the stick, coils writhing, and Sirius can observe how precise the bite is, how it's nothing like when it bit the air around Sirius' ankle.

"People look at them and only see death. Mudbloods come to Hogwarts and think Slytherins picked a devil's symbol, an evil one. But snakes are a creative life force. They shed their skins, symbols of rebirth, transformation, healing and immortality. As deadly as their venom can be, it is also used in most potent healing potions; even in muggle medicines. Never fear them, Sirius. Just make sure not to poke at them."

Padfoot whines, frustrated he isn't understood by the agitated snakes.

He backs away, then breaks into a run, circling the cabin a few times, trying to tire himself.

But Padfoot is tireless, filled with endless energy, endless devotion. Padfoot doesn't like being alone.

He trots back to the house, opens the handle with his jaws, and slinks into the living room.

Voldemort is reading by the fireplace, forever seeking warmth, like the creatures outside. Always so defensive, too.

It thinks you're attacking it, his father said, when the snake was hissing, threatening, looking scary, indeed.

Voldemort always thinks he's under attack, so he strikes down everyone.

But he knows Padfoot is a friend, so he doesn't look up from his book when Padfoot sits at his feet.

And when he lies his head in his lap, Voldemort's fingers twist in his fur, scratching behind his ears, and Padfoot closes his eyes, satisfied.

"I forgot how big you are."

Padfoot tail trashes on the floor, left and right; he buries his snout in Voldemort's hand.

"Good boy."

There's mocking to his tone, and Sirius rolls his eyes, somewhere inside Padfoot, yet Padfoot *likes* to hear it. Perhaps simply a dog trait.

But then again, Sirius always wanted to hear he's a good boy, long before Padfoot existed, when he was growing up.

He lifts his head, shows his teeth, growls.

"Terrifying," Peter called him. *"Seriously, mate. You're like the Grim. You can't imagine how frightening you look when you do that."*

Even Prongs, with his proud, pointy antlers, had once startled, when he tried to stop Moony and Padfoot from killing a hare, and Padfoot snarled at him.

Moony cowed before him, offered Sirius his neck, flopped on his back, when Moony got too close to Hogsmeade, to unsuspecting villagers, and Sirius had to rein him in.

Voldemort is not impressed. One of those elegant fingers traces Padfoot's fangs. White, and long and sharp.

"You do a decent job pretending you're bad," he says. "But you truly are a good boy, deep down."

Fine. If his terrifying growl won't work, then maybe his puppy eyes will have more of an impact, so Padfoot switches to that.

Voldemort laughs. “That’s more like it.” He scratches at Padfoot's ears again. “You look good at my feet. In whatever form.”

Padfoot mock bites him, his jaws gently closing over his wrist.

Voldemort laughs again. “I know you like it, too, no need to deny it.”

It is nice. Safe. What else would a dog like more than being petted, spoiled, wanted?

He puts his head back into Voldemort’s lap, watching the flames dancing in the fireplace as Voldemort returns to his book.

The painful words yelled at dinner melt away, recede back, as Sirius lets Padfoot’s simpler mind take over, basking in warmth and silence.

(-)

“Brave of you to have me over. Everyone knows I’m a Death Eater,” Sirius says, as soon as Mary opens the door. He’s still shocked he’d been invited to Mary’s birthday party, after all the effort Dumbledore took to spread the word about Sirius’ loyalties. Not that Mary is in the Order, but she has friends that are.

And she’s a muggleborn, with more reasons to despise Death Eaters than most people.

She rolls her eyes, steps aside to grant him entrance.

“Everyone who thinks you’re a Death Eater can kiss my arse.”

He grins at her. “A very delectable arse, I can attest-“

“Oh, my God, Sirius! She has a boyfriend!” Lily hisses at him. “Happy birthday, Mary!”

They kiss each other, and Mary asks about the baby, as James, Peter and Sirius make their way inside the house.

Remus isn’t there, it becomes apparent at a glance. Not a surprise. Remus was never very social, shying away from people. It was Sirius and James that used to drag him to parties.

Sirius knew there will be some hostility with some of the people gathered there- there was even *before*, but especially these days. He doesn’t care. Never did. He meets everyone’s eyes, and they soon look away.

“Now, now,” James admonishes, leading Sirius to a couch. “No need to terrify them. That’s not helpful.”

“I’m just looking-“

“You’re glaring.”

“Yeah,” Peter pipes up. “The Black glare. It’s scary.”

“Fine! I’ll be nice.”

James looks doubtful.

“I promise,” Sirius adds.

They do have a good time; half the guests avoid Sirius like the plague, but the other half- mostly of the female persuasion- has no issues coming over to say ‘hi’.

James gets wasted, which was always funny to witness, but it’s even funnier when Sirius is completely sober and he can fully appreciate the ridiculousness.

“You can have a pint or two,” Lily says, shaking her head at some of James’ antics. “I trust you. You don’t need to suffer with me.”

“I’m good,” Sirius assures her. It didn’t even cross his mind that she’d think he’s not drinking because he’s the one that will take her home, on his bike, since she can’t Apparate what with the pregnancy.

“You’re growing up or what?” she mocks, but there is something…odd in her eyes.

Something he doesn’t like, even if he can’t fully decipher.

Sirius shrugs. “It’s just Grandfather. He doesn’t want me drunk in public.”

It’s a good cover; his friends think it’s his grandfather that keeps Sirius safe from Voldemort, offers him protection, as long as Sirius behaves.

“Hmm. Are you still seeing that…man?” Lily asks, quietly.

Sirius’ jaw ticks. He certainly didn’t tell her about ‘that man’. He told James, though, and sometimes James forgets he’s not meant to tell Lily everything about Sirius and his business.

“No.”

“I always thought you were straight.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, bloody hell!” She sighs. “Straight. As in- you only like women.”

“Muggles have a word for that?” Sirius asks, forever shocked at the very muggle need to label everything.

She frowns. “What do purebloods call it?”

“We don’t call it anything. *Straight.*” He huffs. “And if you’re not straight, you’re crooked or what?”

Sirius knows about ‘gay’, since he frequented some of those muggle secret bars. It took him a few minutes to realise what they meant by it. At first, he just thought they were very merry people.

“Forget it.” Lily waves it away. “Anyway, I didn’t know you like men.“

“Don’t worry, I rejected James’ proposition to elope. You can keep him,” he jokes, but there must be something in his tone, some sharpness to it, because she drops the subject.

He does wonder what she thinks of it. She’s muggle raised, and muggles are…*different*. Sure, purebloods obsessed with heirs and lineage are also very adamant on procreating, but with muggles, it’s deeper than that. More complicated. From what Sirius understands, eternal damnation is at stake.

Voldemort is muggle raised, too. Huh. Sirius never thought of it before, in relation to *this* subject.

Clearly, Voldemort is not worried about the state of his soul and eternal damnation, but if Sirius was so bothered about his mother screaming about shame and heirs, and his father’s very subtle displeased expression, he wonders how Voldemort felt, if he heard all that muggle nonsense growing up.

And everyone says muggles were even worse about it in the past.

Great. Sirius managed to go an hour without thinking of Voldemort, and now here he is again, thinking of him.

It’s so hard to stop. He touches the ring, playing with it, distracted, for the rest of the night.

(-)

One day, returning from a party with Rabastan, in the early hours of the morning, they stumble over Snape in the hallways of Lestrange Manor.

“Snivellus!” Sirius exclaims, positively delighted.

Snape is not so happy, his face tensing, shoulder raising, looking like a cornered animal.

Which he is, his back to the wall, Rabastan and Sirius closing in.

“Elf!” Rabastan says, which is rather a tame insult, really. He can do much better-

The elf appears. *Oh, he truly was calling for his elf.*

“Master.” She bows low.

“Why is there dirt in my house?” he demands, and Sirius grins. “Aren’t you supposed to remove filth? Grease? All that shit?”

“Grease?” She frowns, ears trembling. “Where?” A rag appears in her hands as she desperately looks around for any sign of mess.

Snape eyes the exit, but he has no hope of reaching it. He probably just got out of a meeting with Voldemort. Gods know what Voldemort needs from this overgrown bat. His cheeks are red with humiliation, eyes wide with panic. He’s a good duellist, Snape is, but not against Sirius or Rabastan, especially not both at once and in Rabastan’s own house. Raising his wand at them would mean a death sentence.

Rodolphus would never overlook a half-blood mouthing off to his brother in this Manor.

Well, unless that half-blood is Voldemort.

“Truly, Snivellus. Wash your hair, will you?” Sirius sneers at him. “If not for your own sake, for ours.”

“Step away,” Snape barks, but he is scared.

“Make me,” Sirius suggests. He steps closer, crowding Snape into the wall. “Have you gotten smaller? Was he always this puny, Rabastan?”

“No idea,” Rabastan comes closer, too. “I avoid looking at him most of the time, save myself the horror.”

“Master, where is the filth? Please take mercy on this poor elf and tell her, so she can get rid of it!”

“Right here, you blind thing!” Rabastan steps back. “Wash him, will you?”

The elf freezes. Snape flinches.

A part of Sirius finds the prospect incredibly amusing. The other, however, thinks this is taking it a bit too far. He’d rather humiliate Snape verbally, or attack him physically, but using the elf-

“Gods, no! He’ll look worse wet,” he adds, holding back the elf by its tiny shoulders, when it has no choice but to obey the order, as unusual as it is.

“You-” Snape hisses, spluttering, wand in hand now.

“Do you want to take a bath, Snivellus?” Sirius snaps at him. “If not, best be thankful.” He waits. “Say ‘thank you’ and you can leave.”

Snape is almost purple now, fear and humiliation making him even uglier than usual.

“A bit early for you to be up and about,” Voldemort’s voice comes, unexpectedly, from very close by.

The poor elf almost has a heart attack at the surprise of finding herself so close to Voldemort.

Snape kneels, instantly. Rabastan follows a moment later, though he’s so drunk, he almost loses his balance as he’s lowering himself to the floor.

“Whatever do you mean? I’m always up, bright and early,” Sirius mocks.

“You may leave, Severus,” Voldemort says, not even looking at him, instead eyeing Sirius.

He can’t help himself, Sirius thinks, rather smugly. Lately, Voldemort doesn’t bother watching whoever he’s addressing, if Sirius is in the room.

Snape does not need to be told twice, springing upright, muttering ‘my lord’ and disappearing from view.

“Saved his little, scrawny arse,” Sirius says. “Quite the hero, aren’t you? Shield of the disadvantaged.”

“Rabastan, you may leave, as well.”

Nothing happens.

They break eye contact to look at Rabastan; half-kneeling, half-slumping on the floor, his head lolling, with only the poor elf supporting him from collapsing face first into the stone tiles.

Voldemort sighs. “Take him to bed,” he instructs the elf, who immediately disappears, Rabastan and all.

“Don’t take it personally,” Sirius slurs. “You’re not that boring as to put people to sleep, he’s simply drun-”

Sirius shuts up when Voldemort’s tongue finds its way inside his mouth, his back slammed to the wall, though Voldemort’s hand is already cupping the back of his head, protecting it from the impact.

Just like that, Sirius is hard as a rock.

He twists his fingers in Voldemort’s robe, pulling him closer. It’s one that Sirius bought for him; black, imposing, yet with a few subtle silver accents around the hems.

He’s been so tired when he left the party, just enough energy left to escort Rabastan home, make sure he arrives to the Manor safely and doesn’t splinch on the way.

Or that he doesn’t Apparate to Evy’s house to cause a scandal, as he whined all night about her, with escalating rage when spitting out her fiancé’s name.

But all his tiredness is gone, with Voldemort so close. Sirius is filled with energy.

“You do owe me some entertainment,” he says, when they break apart, and he reverses their positions, slamming Voldemort into the wall, far less concerned with protecting Voldemort’s head from the stone.

Alas, he is the dark lord, so there is no ‘thud’, no ‘aw’.

It’s so good to never have to worry about Voldemort’s well being; to be with someone so powerful that Sirius can’t hurt, can’t scare away.

“After you robbed me of Snape.”

He grips Voldemort’s hip tightly, lets some annoyance seep into his voice.

He doesn’t really care about that; it’s always fun to bully Snape, but it’s not as fun as it used to be. Not when Snape can’t fight back at all. It was different at Hogwarts, where Snape had the courage to talk back, curse back, protected in some capacity by teachers all around.

It’s not so much fun here. Like fishing in an overcrowded pound. There’s no thrill to it.

But he is annoyed that Voldemort helped the idiot, intervened on his behalf. Called him Severus.

Voldemort shouldn’t call anyone by their first name, Sirius decides, drunk as he is. Maybe Bella, but that’s it. Voldemort shouldn’t be familiar enough with anyone else. Shouldn’t look at anyone else, unless he meant to kill that person. Otherwise, he should be in his home, waiting for Sirius, thinking about Sirius, wanting only Sirius and nothing else on his mind.

Voldemort smiles at him, not at all bothered by the way Sirius grips him, by what must surely be a possessive and mad look on his face.

Sirius has these bursts of ugly possessiveness, moments where he wants Voldemort only for himself, doesn’t want to share him with the world.

He’s always been possessive, nothing new, but with Voldemort sometimes it gets unbearable, mad indeed.

It frustrates him, especially when he’s drunk, or tired, or in the throes of passion.

“You are so alike your mother,” Voldemort says. Not many things he can say that can put off Sirius, but that is certainly one of them.

Sirius almost flinches at the comparison.

“Such a bully.”

“Thanks,” Sirius hisses, hurt.

Gods, I’m so fucking sensitive. Sirius sneers, disgusted at himself for such weakness.

“It wasn’t an insult,” Voldemort adds, and now he’s the one grabbing Sirius’ hips, bringing him back where he was, even as Sirius was retreating.

“Of course it was. *I* hate my mother, *you* hate my mother, so how am I supposed to take being compared-”

“I don’t hate your mother for being a bully,” Voldemort says, still smiling, terribly amused. “I hated her for trying to bully *me*, but she was quite amusing to watch when she turned on others. Ruthless, cruel and efficient. All qualities I enjoy in a person.”

His other hand cups Sirius’ cheek, his thumb smoothing away the frown of Sirius’ mouth.

“I’ve even forgiven her for past…. transgressions. How could I hate her now, when you come from her?”

Sirius blinks at him, confused. He’s going through so many mood-swings, in seconds, that his tiredness returns.

“You must be the only person in Britain not to hate her, then,” he says, surprised.

And a little touched.

It’s…nice to hear someone not speaking badly of his mother. Sirius always speaks badly of her, but he doesn’t like it when anyone else does it. Not that many dare, not to his face, at least- even Voldemort took great care with his choice of words, in the past- but he knows everyone despises her, regardless.

Besides Regulus, and Kreacher. But Kreacher is not a person, and Regulus is…well. He’s special. Their mother’s favourite; her golden, spoiled child.

Sirius relaxes, supports his chin on Voldemort’s shoulder.

“Hells!”

That’s Rodolphus’ voice. Sirius twists his neck, slightly, to see him hastily turning around, even covering his eyes, walking quickly away from them.

It makes him laugh, especially when they hear him mutter that he hasn’t even had his coffee yet, he’s not ready to see *‘that*’.

“We’re going to give him an aneurism,” Sirius speaks into Voldemort’s shoulder.

“He does look quite bothered lately,” Voldemort agrees, amused.

(-)

Lucius talks of politics, a topic so boring only Voldemort and Yaxley are paying attention to him.

Rookwood appears attentive, but he's blinking far too much. Rodolphus seems displeased- maybe he doesn't like what he's hearing, or could be just his usual state of existing.

Avery isn't there, neither is Dolohov.

Rabastan looks withdrawn. no doubt thinking about Evy's approaching wedding.

Bella's eyes glazed over, staring far ahead, a tiny smile on her lips. Who knows what sick fantasy plays in her mind?

Sirius drums his fingers on the table, in the rhythm of a song Voldemort likes.

Old one, from the fifties. Sirius discovered it a couple of days before, buried between an equally old Elvis record and an unknown German one.

Some women singing about Sandman, asking him for a dream. It's *cute.*

He asked Voldemort what he likes about it. The melody isn't much, and the lyrics are…well. Not something Sirius thought Voldemort would enjoy or relate to.

Mr Sandman, bring me a dream, make him the cutest I ever seen.

"It was popular when I was young," Voldemort said. *"Nostalgic, I suppose."*

It made Sirius smile- his mum is very attached to music from her youth. Though, unlike Voldemort, she refuses to even try newer songs.

Sandman, I'm so alone. Don't have nobody to call my own. Please turn on your magic beans. Mr Sandman, bring me a dream.

It's stuck in Sirius' head now. He finds himself humming it from time to time. In the shower; when he rides, when he waits in line to buy something.

Mr Sandman, someone to hold.

"What are magic beans?" Sirius asks, when Lucius takes a break to breathe.

Rookwood startles, attention returning to his eyes. Rodolphus turns to glare at him.

"*What?*" Lucius just seems confused.

Voldemort almost smiles. "Ignore him," he urges Lucius, who goes back to prattling about old men and old laws.

The meeting drags on for another half an hour. Sirius tries to think of something else, but the stupid song keeps returning to pester him.

“Of course, it would help if Arcturus votes with us,” Yaxley is saying, and hearing his grandfather’s name captures Sirius’ interest.

“He probably will,” Lucius interrupts him. “He might not always agree with our agenda, but it often aligns with his own. I don’t see why he wouldn’t support us, especially in this case.

“Maybe just to piss you off,” Sirius offers.

Lucius’ eyebrow lifts in a perfect arch. “He’s not *you*. He doesn’t have that charming talent of yours to cut his nose to spite his face. Arcturus is wiser than that.”

“Still, why not talk to him, Sirius?” Yaxley turns to him. “It is, after all, your vote. He should use it the way you want it used. Can’t hurt to-”

“No, no. If Sirius asks, then certainly Black, *wise* as he is,” Rodolphus mocks, “will be more inclined to do the opposite. Can’t truly blame him. I wouldn’t do anything Sirius suggests, either.”

“Piss off. I’ll talk to him,” Sirius tells Yaxley. “He will listen.”

Lucius looks doubtful. Rodolphus snorts. Even Voldemort doesn’t seem to have faith in Sirius.

It annoys him. Sirius is *capable*. He doesn’t even know what law they’re trying to pass, doesn’t even care, but he just wants to feel useful. It’s not like he actually does anything for the Death Eaters or Voldemort. Well, he warms Voldemort’s bed and sings for him, but that only makes it worse, makes him feel like a house-wife or something.

“And how will you accomplish that?” Rodolphus demands to know.

“Not your business,” Sirius barks. He crosses his arms and disengages with the conversation again, brooding.

Fucking arrogant arseholes.

They resume their plotting, and Sirius imagines the best way to embarrass Rodolphus, in a very public setting. There are so many ways to do it, he can’t pick one, and then, as his anger goes away, the song is back in his head, playing on a loop.

Tell him that his lonesome nights are over. Sandman, I’m so alone, don’t have nobody to call my own.

“Dismissed,” Voldemort finally says, and Parkinson hurries to leave. He and Avery are always the first to leave.

“So, what are magic beans?” Sirius asks again, as Lucius collects some papers he spread on the table to show to the others.

“They turn into beanstalks that reach into the sky,” Voldemort answers, standing. “You can find a giant’s castle up there.”

Now, everyone is confused. Lucius frowns. Bella snaps out of her daydream.

“I’m sorry, my lord, what was that?”

“Giants?” Rodolphus asks. “In the sky?”

Sirius is convinced this is one of those obscure muggle references Voldemort sometimes makes. Like that Einstein lad, that had Sirius hunting through muggle libraries for information about him only to discover he was a boring math man or something to that effect.

“Where can I get these beans?”

“You’ll have to ask Jack,” Voldemort answers, heading to the door and through it before anyone else has the chance to speak.

“Huh?”

“Who is Jack?”

“What are magic beans? Never head of that!”

Sirius sighs, ignoring the others. Great, now he has to hunt for this Jack.

(-)

Caught between his grandfather’s relentless badgering, his mother’s worsening alcoholism, Narcissa’s never ending comments, and recently letters from his grandmother Irma, Sirius agrees to ‘meet a young woman’, just to get them off his back.

Though he mostly agrees to it because the girl in question is the daughter of a friend of his father’s. Not that his father truly had friends, at least not like Sirius has friends.

The man knew a lot of people, had a vast network of acquaintances, enjoyed a rich social life, yet at the end of the day, he never cared about those people. He never had a best friend, like Sirius has James. He never had a confidant, though plenty of men confided in him, sought him out to ask for his advice in all matter of issues.

“I don’t need friends. I have family,” he told a fourteen old Sirius, when Sirius finally noticed that no matter how much his father seemingly enjoyed himself with Abraxas or other men around his age, things weren’t quite as they should have been. “*Alphard and Cygnus are my friends.”*

“You don’t like either of them.”

“I don’t have to like them; I trust them, and they trust me. We are bound by blood and it is my duty to love them and protect them, as it is theirs to love and protect me. You will learn, as

you grow older, that you can only trust family."

In any case, his dad still knew an incredible amount of people, and Sirius misses hearing about him. Probably his mother imagined this is the best way to tempt Sirius into agreeing to have dinner.

On top of that, Sirius used a little blackmail on his own. He told his grandfather that he'll agree to meet the woman, if he votes with Lucius and the other idiots at the next Wizengamot meeting.

"Give her a chance," his grandfather says, a day before the meeting. *"You don't have to settle for her, if you don't like her, but just allow yourself the possibility to like her."*

Apparently, just agreeing to meet her is enough to mellow his grandad. He doesn't mind the blackmail, agrees to vote with Lucius, assuring Sirius he would have, anyway, and doesn't even come to dinner, claiming Sirius is head of House now, and his presence would only undermine Sirius' authority.

Most likely he doesn't want to see Sirius' mother again.

To his surprise, Sirius doesn't have a bad time. His mother is sober, Regulus is…well, Regulus, and the Egyptians are an alright bunch.

Sirius spends most of the dinner talking to the patriarch, ignoring the daughter, far more interested in hearing stories from the man's youth at the Institute, stories that, obviously, include his father.

To his shock, his mum seems to have an enjoyable time, too. Possibly, she was *friendly* with Mrs El-Shamy back in the day.

Sirius does remember visiting the family in Egypt a few times, when he was very young, but the memories are distant, and more about the pyramids and meeting native magical beasts that he had never seen before.

"We had the best of times," the woman says, with a kind, fond smile.

Apparently his parents went on something that sounds oddly similar to *double dates* with these people, 'having a grand old time', enjoying magical Cairo's nightlife.

Sirius can't quite imagine it. *Any* of it- his parents, as young people, basically *partying*, though he's sure it was a very dignified type of partying.

"You still insisted you didn't want to marry Orion, remember?" Mrs El-Shamy teases his mother. "No one believed you. The look on your face when that Swedish girl was trying to ingratiate herself to Orion…." she laughs. "You had a talk with her, scared her half to death, and she never approached him again."

His mother smiles. She downright *smiles*. "She married one of my French cousins," she drawls. "To this day, she still flinches when she sees me."

Sirius heard a bit about the years his parents spent in Egypt before they got married. They were already engaged, and his mum went with his dad to Cairo, apparently upsetting Sirius' both grandmothers, because it wasn't 'proper' to live together before making their vows.

"He was a great man," Mr El-Shamy concludes, towards the end of the meal. "A great man. We won't see his like again."

Then, after dessert, Mr El-Shamy retreats to smoke a cigar with Regulus, talking about something that sounds incredibly nerdy; his mum and Mrs El-Shamy go to another living room for some coffee, and Sirius is left alone with Aminah.

Right, right. This is why I'm here. He half forgot during the meal, so invested in the stories.

An awkward silence follows, almost instantly.

Sirius prepares to make a joke, lighten the atmosphere, when she talks.

"I can't marry you. I'm already seeing someone."

Marvellous. Sirius gives her one of his most winning smiles. "No worries, I'm not fond of the idea of marriage, either. Do your parents know, though?"

She sighs. "They do. The boy I like is from a lesser family, but they promised they'll accept him, with the condition I agree to meet some men they suggest, first. They keep hoping I'd fall in love with someone of their choosing. "

Sirius offers to play the gentleman and be the one that refuses the arrangement, to spare her of any potential repercussions.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you."

With that out of the way, they have an interesting conversation about the Dark Arts, something she's passionate about, and not that frowned upon in Egypt. She tells him of her schooling at Uagadou, and Sirius talks of Hogwarts, followed by a polite disagreement over which one is best.

Truly, not a bad night.

However, the biggest win is that his mum smiled, her eyes softened for the duration of the visit, and even after their guests leave, she doesn't ask Dobby for a glass- or a *bottle*- of wine, pours only a little bit of whiskey in her cup of coffee.

She doesn't scream at Sirius when he tells her he didn't like Aminah; like his grandfather, she seems content just by the fact he agreed to meet her and was perfectly polite over dinner, acted the proper Black and didn't shame their family.

On his way back to Voldemort's house, flying on his bike, Sirius breathes in relief. This was the first time in years he sat with his mum for hours, and not an insult flew between them, not a scowl. He honestly can't remember when was the last time he experienced something like that.

“How was dinner?” Voldemort asks, when Sirius comes in, somewhat wet from a sudden downpour.

“Not bad, surprisingly. I’ll write to grandfather tomorrow to tell him I won’t marry the girl, but at least they’ll let me breathe for a while, now that I tried.”

“They’ll never stop pressuring you into getting a wife and providing them with an heir.” Voldemort’s voice holds no inflection. Just stating a fact.

Sirius shrugs. “They might stop if Regulus gets married. So I’m thinking to pressure *him* into it. He resisted mother so far, but he’ll have a harder time standing up to me.”

Putting his book aside, Voldemort tilts his head slightly, observing Sirius. “You don’t want children?”

It’s an odd conversation to have with someone he’s fucking. It was way worse when Marlene would ask about it, oh so casually, it freaked Sirius out, but it’s not like Voldemort is asking for the same reasons Marlene was. They can’t have children, so it doesn’t freak Sirius out. But it’s just…odd, because if Sirius hypothetically wanted children, then he’d have to marry a woman.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Sirius frowns at him. “Why don’t you want children?” he shoots back. Granted, Voldemort never said he doesn’t want them, but it’s fairly obvious.

“I wasn’t raised with the mindset that one has to have children. I don’t have a millennia's worth of legacy to pass on to someone else, and I have no duty to my parents, certainly.”

Sirius, because he’s uncomfortable, snaps. “You do have a duty. You’re Salazar’s last heir. You’re the only person in the world that can speak Parseltongue. It would die with you-“

“I’m not going to die.”

Fair enough.

Sirius throws himself on the couch, his wet robe clinging to his skin, but he can’t be bothered to dry it. “I have no interest in raising my replacement,” Sirius says.

That’s what children are- male children- in old families. An heir is a replacement for his father. A spare is a replacement for an heir.

Towards the end of his fifth year, McGonagall held one-on-one meetings with every Gryffindor in his class, to discuss their future careers.

Sirius can’t remember what he was thinking when he went to meet her. He wasn’t really thinking, he supposes. It was probably something he knew he had to do- see McGonagall- and din’t put much thought into it as he made his way to her office.

She sat him down and then asked him what he wanted to do once he was out of Hogwarts. If he's interested in any career.

He *froze*. He, who always had an answer ready, froze in that chair, staring at her as if she asked him to invent a spell to revive the dead.

Until that very moment, Sirius never questioned what he would do with his life. No one in his family ever asked him what he wants to do when he grows up, the way Mr Potter asked James, or Mr Lupin asked Remus.

Sirius has no funny stories of wanting to be an Auror or a dragon handler or a Quidditch star, like other boys.

He knew what he would be, since he was old enough to crawl. He knew he was an Heir, and that it was important, before he properly learned his own name.

It was a foretold thing, it was already established what he will become, before he was born. In fact, that is *why* he was born.

To be a replacement for his father. To become head of his house, manage his family affairs, interfere with the Ministry and hold the Blacks together, secure their legacy and then procreate and pass it on to his own replacement, eventually.

He saw, in his mind, his vast family tree. Names shifted, turned, until they became one. One person, through centuries, The Black, Head of the Most Noble and Ancient Family. After all that's what Sirius knows of them, that's all that remained.

He never considered it properly, not until he sat in that office and McGonagall asked him what he wants to be.

It was only made worse by the fact that he knew his father was dying.

So Sirius being his replacement only hit harder. The thought struck him that his father somehow started dying the day Sirius was born, because that is all they were- a new version of the Black head of house, so once Sirius arrived his father could just die and no one would care that much.

Strange, *awful* thoughts, all going through his head as he stared at McGonagall, gripped by existential terror. And guilt. He wasn't even sure why he was feeling guilty. He felt like a thief, a fraud. Like his mere existence was theft, stealing all his father's hard work, his identity, erasing him from history. Because his father was Orion just inside their household. Outside, he was Mr Black, and would anyone even notice when Sirius becomes Mr Black? Will they notice he's a different one?

The King is dead, long live the King.

He felt that he could only become someone once his father was dead, because there was no place for two heads of house, so Sirius couldn't be anything while his dad still lived. Because

he didn't *want* to be anything else; he wasn't *prepared* to be anything else- just the future Mr Black. That was all he was taught, all he knew.

It was beyond unsettling. And it unsettles him now, too, as he stares at the ceiling. Having children is just one more step in replacing his father, one step closer to the world forgetting Orion Black.

McGonagall usually had this severe expression on her face; it was a victory to rip a smile out of her on the best of days; James and Sirius would bet ridiculous amounts of gold on who can make her crack a smile. But as she watched Sirius not being able to come up with an answer, her face transformed with pity, softness- all that shit. And then she forced Sirius to eat a biscuit and told him he is one of her best students before letting him leave her office.

"I wish they'd leave me alone," Sirius whispers, more to himself. A childish desire, but he really wants his family to back off on this marriage business.

He finally feels the cold, and he shivers, before he stands and starts taking off his wet clothes. He knows it annoys Voldemort when Sirius throws off his clothes all over the place, especially in the living room, but the man never complained so far, just made a comment that it's so obvious Sirius was raised with elves following his every step, cleaning up after him.

"Everyone knows you will cave, eventually," Voldemort says, not looking up from his book. "Even you must be aware of it in some capacity, despite your remarkable talent for self deception."

Sirius' fingers stop over the buttons of his robe.

For a second, he feels so many things, he actually feels nothing, confused by it all; anger, shock, betrayal, insecurity, all at once.

Once he recovers from the onslaught, he settles on anger, as always, but he's too aware of the insecurity under it, so he tries to hide them both.

He keeps unbuttoning his robe. *You don't look upset at the prospect,* he thinks to say.

But if he says that, it implies Voldemort should be upset, that they have something important going on.

We do.

Do we? If he so calmly says I'm going to get married?

"Perhaps," Sirius drawls, driven by an instinct to save face, to not show hurt.

Voldemort turns the page, says nothing.

Sirius doesn't know what to do with himself. It's a dejected sort of anger, a hopeless anger he hadn't felt before. He doesn't know what to do with it.

Not even half a year ago, he'd pull on some muggle clothes, get drunk and pick up a muggle girl.

But now he doesn't even have the energy for that.

So he takes off his robe, throws it on the floor, picks a book out of Voldemort's vast collection and then pretends to read it.

Of course, being who he is, he doesn't pretend very well. He's hurt, and he's annoyed at himself for feeling hurt and insecure, so he becomes standoffish, cold, and withdrawn.

Several times, over the next few days, he thinks he simply shouldn't be in Voldemort's presence, since he's at fault for all this, but somehow Sirius can't abstain from *needing* to see him, be close to him.

So he returns to the cabin after he takes long drives on his bike or has lunches with the Potters or the Malfoys or his adventures with little Dora.

"Is something bothering you?" Voldemort asks him, over dinner, a tiny frown between his eyebrows.

"No." Sirius answered too fast, he's aware, but there's nothing to do about it now.

"You've been unnaturally quiet lately."

Sirius shrugs. Voldemort frowns harder.

"Just busy thinking of potential brides," Sirius spits out, and he turns his attention to his food, glaring at it.

It was quiet before, as Voldemort mentioned, but now the silence becomes thick, impossible to ignore, tinged with tension. It goes on for several more minutes, before Voldemort stands, moves around the table until he's looming over Sirius.

"How did I upset you? What do you want from me?" he asks, fingers under Sirius' jaw, lifting his head. "Do not say 'nothing'," he warns, softly, just as Sirius was opening his mouth to say exactly that.

So, instead, he says: "It should be fairly obvious."

"Perhaps." Voldemort's voice is still soft, but with an undercurrent of frustration to it. "No less confusing, however. You don't like being owned, you despise people telling you what to do, controlling you, putting limitations on what you perceive as freedom- people that aren't your *family*, of course," he spits, and the frustration only grows. "If I demand that you never marry, that you should never bed another person, you would resent me, you would feel trapped. Yet, apparently, if I say nothing, if I let you do what you want or what your family demands of you, you will still resent me. So, Sirius, what *exactly* do you want from me?"

"How about a genuine fucking reaction?" Sirius hisses, shoving his hand away. "Something real, not what you think I want to hear, in order to manipulate me into thinking you have no

flaws?" He stands, getting in Voldemort's face. "And you knew exactly what I wanted, so far, didn't you? Because you provided it. You knew what to say. For once, you don't, so why not try actually meaning whatever comes out of your mouth?"

"I'm not mani-"

"I'm not an idiot!" Sirius snarls at him.

As if he doesn't know Voldemort is far more patient with Sirius than he'd ever be with someone else. As if he doesn't know Voldemort probably abstains from cracking Sirius' skull open a dozen times a day.

Not that it upsets him. Voldemort allows Sirius' moods to play out, patiently, coax him in the direction he wants him on- it shows *effort*, it proves Voldemort wants him, and that's why he's even bothering with all this.

It's what his father did, too. Gently manipulated Sirius into agreeing to things he wouldn't normally pick on his own. It worked far better than his mother's tactics: honest, but harsh and cruel. She never managed to convince him of anything.

That was all Sirius wanted, some gentleness, someone to understand how he works, what to say to him. Someone that sees him, knows him.

Voldemort did it wonderfully, at least until he so calmly said Sirius will marry some girl.

Maybe he grew tired of me, finally. He realised it takes too much effort to walk on eggshells around me and wouldn't be too upset to let me go.

"There's a difference between owning someone or trying to take their freedom and not minding if they *marry someone else*, for fuck sake!"

"What is the difference?"

"I don't fucking know!" Sirius yells, equally frustrated.

Marlene would have never been alright with Sirius marrying someone else. She'd have thrown a fit just at a joke about it.

And Sirius would have hated it, would have resented her, would have felt trapped, the way she often made him feel.

The difference is that you didn't love her, after all. He finally knows the answer if he ever loved her or not, now that he looks at Voldemort.

Sirius cared for her, loved her as a friend, but he didn't love her like he loves-

That's *terrifying.* The thought sends cold shivers down his spine.

Voldemort breathes in, his nostrils flaring for a second, and then his shoulders relax as he gathers his infinite patience.

“I obviously don’t wish for you to marry anyone.”

There, was that so hard? Sirius already feels better.

“But you will,” he goes on, *ruining* it. “They’ll pressure you, and you’ll give in, because you are far too in love with your name, far too attached to your father’s memory and what he’d have wanted for you.”

Sirius huffs. “I’m currently not doing anything my father wanted me to do, I assure you- “

“And you feel guilty for it.”

“I’m used to it,” he spits. Sirius lived with guilt ever since he ran away from home. In fact, one way or another, he felt guilt all his life for not being the perfect heir. “I can live with my decisions.”

Voldemort reaches for him, and his fingers soon curl around the back of Sirius’ neck, no pressure to the grip, just steadying, reassuring.

He looks into those bloodshot eyes and calms, slightly. It should be worrying, how fast Voldemort can calm him down, how easy it is for him.

“I promised you, when we first met, that if you join me, you won’t have to pretend anymore. That you can live the life you want, as you want it. Of course, I was thinking of saving you from Dumbledore and your little friends with their outstanding, rigorous morals. There’s no saving you from your family, because you don’t want it.” The thumb rubs a small circle on Sirius’ nape. Voldemort tilts his head, considering Sirius. “I don’t want you to drown in guilt for the rest of your life. Marry or not, it is your choice to make, not mine.”

“What do *you* want?” Sirius asks him. “What about you?”

Voldemort’s lips turn at the corners. “You need not worry about me, Sirius.”

“But-”

“You focus on whatever would fulfil you or bring some sort of balance between what would give you happiness and what would please your family. I always find ways to get what I want, you shouldn’t concern yourself with it. Of course, I would prefer you never wed, I would prefer it if you *never* step out of this house.” His fingers tighten around Sirius’ neck, possessive. Sirius shivers. “I can make that happen. Alas, that would break you, and I like you …as you are. I have little interest in turning you into a mindless toy. You are yet to disappoint me, which is a rare feat. So do whatever you want- a wife certainly is no impediment for me. A nuisance, to be sure, but nothing of consequence.”

He truly does know what to say, always. Does he mean any of it? If he weren’t the dark lord, Sirius would rip inside his head with Legilimency until he’d find out the truth.

“Nothing of consequence? Maybe I would be a faithful husband and refuse to find myself in your bed again.”

Voldemort laughs, and he lets go of Sirius' neck. The tension dissipates.

"I know I say you take after Walburga, and you do, but you also take after Orion. I have no doubt you'd emulate his behaviours as a husband."

Feeling helpless with how easy Voldemort can control and direct Sirius' emotions, he decides to stay mad.

"How did you two get along at Hogwarts, anyway?" he barks, knowing the answer will upset him.

It's why he never asks Voldemort about his father, even if he likes to hear stories of his mum or Cygnus, Alphard, Abraxas and so on from Voldemort's school days. He just knows anything Voldemort would say about his dad will upset Sirius.

He knows his dad hated Voldemort, but he never heard it, not directly. Just Lucius saying the man warned him and Rodolphus about Voldemort's blood status; well, that, and he *knew* his father, what type of man he was, how he perceived the world around them. He'd never approve of Voldemort, in any capacity, and Sirius doesn't want to hear it.

"We didn't." Voldemort sits, stirs his tea. "Orion was no Walburga; he wasn't a bully. While she liked to antagonise me, he pretended I didn't exist; didn't look at me, didn't say a word. When I was made Head Boy, he was made a Prefect. We had mandatory meetings, to schedule Patrols and discuss House affairs. Even then, he acted as if I wasn't there. Unlike you, he was good at pretending. Our Charms teacher was a muggleborn, and everyone in the school knew Orion never talked to him; he went to his class, and he was a prodigy in Charms, but he never answered the man's questions, even when specifically addressed. So, in our meetings, he'd discuss relevant matters with the Head Girl, a proper pureblood. Of course, he wasn't happy to take directions from a girl, but apparently he could stomach acknowledging her, at least."

Yeah, that sounds exactly like his father. He was never overly cruel, never one to bully others. His other relatives would rage at mudbloods, but his father simply ignored them.

"I have no time to spare on those beneath me," he would often say. *"It's as absurd as being angry with an insect stuck to my boot."*

He considered everyone to be beneath him- that's why he was rarely angry with someone. Only family got to him, Cygnus and Alphard specifically. Other Black men were not considered lesser, so they were worthy of his anger.

Yet things must have changed, Sirius is sure, when Voldemort returned from his travels, no longer a poor mudblood, but a powerful dark wizard.

He opens his mouth to ask about that, but he deflates. Hearing about his father's antics didn't upset Sirius, didn't anger him. It just makes him feel *sad.*

He knows from experience how much worse it feels to be ignored- far worse than being screamed at. When his mother acted as if Sirius didn't exist, as if he was not her son, when

they met on the streets after Sirius ran away, it was so much more painful than any of her screams or her slaps. When James ignored Sirius after the Snape and the shack incident, those weeks were miserable.

Sirius resumes his seat, too. He picks up his fork, but he isn't any hungrier than he'd been ten minutes before. He pushes his food around for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry," he says to his mashed potatoes.

"You know how ridiculous I find it when someone takes pride in their family's accomplishments, in a reputation and wealth one didn't personally contribute to."

"Oh, I know," Sirius assures him, stabbing some vegetables with his fork.

Voldemort is self-made, and he only respects self-made men.

"I find it even more ridiculous to apologise for wrongdoings you didn't commit."

At least there's that.

"If I were to hold the sons of my former classmates responsible for their parents' actions, you'd all be dead by now." He takes a sip of tea. "Besides, I told you I've forgiven them. The boy they hated doesn't exist anymore."

Hearing that only makes Sirius sadder. It's so depressing to see Voldemort's disgust and hate for his own self. Younger self.

He *is* Tom Riddle, and he knows it, despite his deluded insistences that he's a different person. Voldemort talks of his youth often enough when Sirius finds the right way to approach the topic, and he refers to himself in first person, for fuck's sake!

***I** was born in an orphanage.*

*Orion pretended **I** didn't exist.*

***My** former classmates.*

It's so random whenever he switches from 'I' to 'that boy' or to 'Tom Riddle' who is apparently dead.

Sirius sighs. He finally looks at him. "But say you didn't forgive them, and you'd be the type to take it on their children. Which one of us would have died first?" he attempts to joke.

Voldemort allows it, smiling. "Oh, Lucius, without doubt."

Sirius feels a tiny smile on his own face. "Really? From that crowd, it was Abraxas that pissed you off the most?"

"Nothing disgusts me more than a man without a spine. At least your relatives remained firm in their convictions; Abraxas *adjusts* his often, whenever he senses the winds are changing.

He and I, we went through many phases before we reached our current…friendship."

It's clear by his tone that he does not consider Abraxas a friend, despite Abraxas' support in the war. Then again, who would consider that man a friend?

"That's Malfoys for you," Sirius mutters.

"Lucius is a better man that Abraxas," Voldemort insists.

"Oh, no doubt," Sirius agrees, and he takes a bite of his food, his stomach no longer in knots. "You know I like him, but Lucius also has strong survival instincts. He, too, keeps an eye on those winds."

Voldemort shrugs. "His flattery sounds more honest. He rarely annoys me. On the other hand, whenever I see Abraxas, I have to remind myself not to hurt him."

"I once threw up on him, when I was five or so," Sirius recounts. "He was so mad, but there was nothing he could do about it." Lucius grinned like a lunatic in the background, safely out of Abraxas' sight.

The rest of the dinner goes smoothly, as Sirius delights Voldemort with memories of the many, many times he annoyed Abraxas as a child or a teenager.

Later, after Sirius fucks him and they're lying side by side in bed, he supports his weight on his elbow and looks at Voldemort.

"I won't marry," he says. "I have no interest in it." He bites his lip, but decides to go on. "And I'm not sleeping with anyone else. I haven't, in quite some time."

"I noticed." Again with the matter-of-fact tone. With that nonchalantly that endears Voldemort to him, but also frustrates him to no end.

Sirius narrows his eyes at him. "You should be happy about it."

"I am," Voldemort finally admits, though he sounds *odd*. His voice is softer, lacking in its usual conviction. As if he's unsure, unaccustomed to such a human weakness- *happiness*, the plight of dark lords, everywhere.

Sirius rolls his eyes, but he goes to sleep feeling much lighter.

(-)

This time, Cygnus doesn't walk past their table. He stops, glares down at Sirius with the full brunt of a Black stare.

Silence falls over them, making the air thicker. The restaurant becomes silent, everyone holding their breath.

Sirius won't talk first, and neither will Cygnus.

Luckily, there's a Black there that wasn't taught these lessons.

"Hi," Dora says, blessedly unaware of who exactly she's addressing, of what a monster Cygnus can be.

But he's a man, too. A father. A bad father, abusive and overbearing while also distant. But a father, nonetheless.

His eyes pull away from Sirius, settling on Dora, and *that's it*! Sirius knows, he knows, that this is the most important thing. The hardest.

Nothing softens in those eyes; they only grow harder, colder, but Sirius knows that's only how a Black hides pain, or vulnerability, or weakness, as they call any feeling that is not anger.

Cygnus takes in Dora, with Andromeda's brown hair, with eyes shaped like Bella's, with Cissa's nose, with lips that could have been taken from Cygnus and plastered straight on her little face.

Blood is thicker than water. Blood calls to blood, Sirius well knows it.

"Hello," he drawls, and Sirius breathes in relief.

Someone *gasps* further away.

Cygnus turns, eager to leash out at an innocent bystander.

Poor Mrs Sewleyn grows pale under his fierce gaze. The entire restaurant looks away, goes back to their prattling about someone else' business.

Now that Cygnus talked first, Sirius can open his mouth.

"Why don't you join us?" he asks, gesturing at the table.

See, Father? The things I do for our family? I do care. I care enough to ask this arsehole to eat with me.

The man sits, gaze roaming over Dora's face with such intensity most children would have flinched away.

But she is Black, she *is*, if only half. She was on the receiving end of that stare from her own mother, when Andromeda grew angry. Dora is brave, so she does not flinch. Instead, she studies Cygnus as intently as he studies her.

Sirius hides a smile with a cup of wine. More relief. Him taking Dora around would discourage most people from ever bothering her again, about her blood. But Sirius is not as respected, not as feared. Sirius is still a boy in the eyes of many.

Yet now Cygnus sat with her, acknowledge her. No one will ever sneer at this little girl again.

“I’m Dora,” she says, clueless about who exactly Cygnus is. She extends a hand, to be shaken, the way they teach her at that stupid muggle school.

She morphs, too. Her hair turns black as ink, as it always does when she meets someone new and instinctively tries to mimic them.

Cygnus’ eyes grow wide with surprise.

“You’re a metamorphmagus,” he says, awed.

Sirius takes her hand, pulls it in his lap, as to not leave the poor girl hanging.

“Yes,” she says, proudly. “It’s like very rare. No one else can do it!”

“My grandfather could,” Cygnus says.

“Wicked!” Her face comes alight with joy and excitement, her features ripple, until they become a miniature Cygnus, down to his short hair. “Can I meet him? I want to meet someone like me!”

“He’s dead, love,” Sirius whispers. “He was old.” And drunk, and mean, and he’d have had Dora hanged for polluting his bloodline, probably.

“Oh.” She deflates.

“Your mother never told you this gift runs in her family?”

Another milestone. Cygnus acknowledges Andromeda exists for the first time in many years.

Dora shakes her head. “No. Mummy never talks about her family. It makes her cry, so I stopped asking.”

Cygnus *flees*- sure, it’s a dignified flight, it looks as if he actually meant to leave, but Sirius knows better.

“Did I say something bad?” Dora asks, confused, looking at his hastily retreating back.

“Only the truth,” Sirius assures her, kissing her forehead.

(-)

Evy's wedding is gorgeous. As always, Lucius offers his manor for the party.

Half the weddings in their circles are held at Malfoy Manor, on account of those beautiful gardens.

But especially in this case, the Macnairs sold their own manor long ago, and one can't host a wedding in a townhouse.

"Lucius would have made a good little wife," Bellatrix sniggers. "He loves parties, and fashion and being a host."

"You are such a bitch," Cissa comments, startling all of them, because she never swears, especially in public.

It's her pregnancy. The bigger her belly gets, the more moody and unfiltered she becomes.

Bella raises an eyebrow at her. "No wonder you get along so well. You probably gossip and go hunting for the perfect robe, and braid each other's hair as you discuss the merits of gold cutlery versus silver."

Cissa sends her a glare so vicious that even Bella backs off.

"That's fine, darling," Lucius says, appearing out of nowhere at their side, obviously having heard the exchange. "Bellatrix is just jealous because she doesn't make a good wife at all."

"Oh, no, Malfoy. What an insult," Bella drawls, imitating him. "How shall I ever show my face in public again, knowing you don't think me a good wife?"

Cissa winces, her hand on her belly, and both Lucius and Bella forget to bicker, and hover around her, worried.

"Are you alright, darling?"

"Cissy?"

Sirius winks at Narcissa and her fake winces, moving away from them.

He barely gets to take a step before Rodolphus stops him. "Keep an eye on Rabastan. Make sure he doesn't do something stupid, or I'll take his head off."

While Sirius personally would love some dramatics- Selwyn's wedding from a decade ago is still his favourite wedding ever, what with Miranda standing up in the middle of the ceremony, confessing she slept with the groom and she's carrying his child- he does care about Rabastan and doesn't want Rodolphus to behead him, so he stays glued to his side for the entire thing.

Rabastan does nothing stupid. He drinks, oh, he drinks *a lot*, but he says nothing. At all. To anyone.

Regulus comes to check in on them, Barty at his side, as always. Barty is honestly a surprise for Sirius- while many Death Eaters are in awe with Voldemort, Barty is…different.

He knows Voldemort has meetings with the boy, one on one, more often than he bothers with others. And there's such adoration in Barty's eyes, whenever Voldemort is mentioned. Weird as hell.

Avery comes to pat Rabastan on the back, too, and he gets snarled at for his efforts.

When they're all gathered, seated, Paul at the dais, and Mr Macnair walks in with Evy on his arm, Rabastan growls beside Sirius, but otherwise makes no move to kidnap Evy and disappear into the sunset.

Evy looks splendid. She smiles, her dress is a vision, her hair arranged to perfection.

Her smile slips only for a second when she walks past them and she makes eye contact with Rabastan.

Mr Macnair pulls her along, and then she's smiling again, on her way to Paul.

Rabastan gets tenser and tenser after the ceremony is done, and they move to the ballroom. Sirius tries to talk to him, but he might as well talk to his plate, for all the attention Rabastan gives him.

When the bride and groom have their first dance, Rabastan's glass breaks between his fingers.

"Alright, I think we'll call it a night," Sirius says, standing. "Give Evy our best, will you? Tell her she looks gorgeous," he says to no one in particular.

Cissa nods, and Sirius hauls Rabastan up and guides him out of the ballroom.

"What do you want to do?" he asks, as they get out of the manor, heading to the end of the AntiAppartion wards.

"Kill Paul," Rabastan finally speaks.

"Can't do that, pick something else. Anything else."

"Torture some muggles."

"For fuck's sake, mate! Give me something I can work with! Let's go somewhere quiet. Drink. Talk-"

"Women sit around and talk about their feelings," Rabastan snaps at him. "What, you wanna hold my hand and tell me everything will be alright?"

Sirius keeps his temper under control. Rabastan is upset- Sirius would be upset in his place, too- so he tries to keep that in mind.

“Alright, no talking. Just drinking.”

He Apparates them to Lestrange Manor. Safer this way, no reason to risk exposing Rabastan to potentially innocent bystanders in a pub.

Rabastan does talk, eventually, after another bottle of firewhsikey.

Sirius doesn’t hold his hand, but he pats his back. It’s hard to comfort men like them, it always was. He can hug James, when James is upset. Smile at him and talk softly. It works with Peter and once worked with Remus, too.

But it won’t work with someone like Rabastan, who will see it as pity, who’ll snap at Sirius if he tries it.

Like Sirius would snap at him, if he were in his position.

So he lets him talk; of course, Rabastan doesn’t confess to feeling any pain, to being upset, to feeling desperate. Oh, no. It’s all about killing Paul, various fantasies about how he’ll do it. Several of those versions feature castration first.

To switch it up, sometimes it’s Mr Macnair he kills, or Walden, or both.

Strangely, he never speaks of killing Rodolphus, who was the only one that opposed Rabastan and Evy marrying.

The Macnairs would have preferred Rabastan over Paul, would have been delighted at such a match. Rich and prestigious, at once.

Alas, rarely in families like Black or Lestrange does the blame fall on who is actually to blame. Because, most often, the responsible one is the father, the elder brother, the grandfather- the one with all the power and it’s no use to lash out at someone like that.

And there Rodolphus comes, when the sun is starting to rise, Bella on his arm.

Rabastan has been reduced to unintelligible noises, slumped over the table.

Bella sighs when she reaches them. She bends over Rabastan, pats his hair, gently. “You poor thing,” she says.

“Thank you, Sirius.” Rodolphus comes closer, too. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.” He almost sounds soft when he shakes Rabastan’s shoulder.

“He loves her,” Sirius says, glaring at Rodolphus. “He loves her and you didn’t care-“

“He’ll love another.”

Rodolphus lifts Rabastan.

“Don’t touch me, you prick,” Rabastan slurs. “Fucking hate you-“

“You’ll get over it,” Rodolphus asserts, and then half carries Rabastan away.

Bella sighs again. She pulls a pin from her hair, causing it to fall down her shoulders in a thick, gorgeous black curtain of perfect curls.

“Proud of your husband?”

She gives him a look, walking away. “If Rabastan truly loved her, he wouldn’t have given a shit about what Rodolphus had to say. If Evy truly loved him, she wouldn’t have married another. If one doesn’t fight for what they want, then they don’t deserve it.”

And, with that parting wisdom, she disappears through the door, and Sirius is left alone, upset, and sad on Rabastan’s behalf.

(-)

“We’re not letting them get away with that, right?” Sirius asks, when they get out of the room, their steps heavy on the stone hallway.

Sirius’ and Lucius’ steps, at least, their heavy dragon hide boots hitting the floor; Voldemort, as always, makes little noise. It helps that he always wears soft looking boots, supple and light.

He favours them because he likes to be as quick on his feet as possible, Sirius assumes.

Voldemort looks so exceptional, so ethereal and unique, yet he can quickly blend in, unnoticed, when he so desires.

Probably years of experience, having to tread lightly, to navigate pureblood egos around him, or savage muggles at that orphanage of his, or older, experienced dark wizards on his travels, back when he was young.

You don’t need it anymore!

Voldemort has become so powerful, that he needs none of his old tricks.

Not tricks. More like survival techniques.

Sirius wouldn’t know about it; neither would Lucius. They never had to blend in, to be unobtrusive, to disguise themselves. They always had their families, their fathers in their corner, ready to defend them.

They’re somewhere on the border between Finland and Norway, high up north; Sirius wasn’t supposed to come, but he insisted, because he wants to be useful, and he can’t do that in England. Voldemort keeps him away from battle back home, either to protect Sirius, or because he knows Sirius wouldn’t really like having to kill or injure Order Members.

But they're far away from everything Sirius knows and loves; the vampires in England asked Voldemort to speak with some nordic dark lords about releasing a vampire coven they had captured in Finland.

The conversation didn't go too well.

"You have no name. No history," one man spat at Voldemort. *"Perhaps you can subdue your little British compatriots, but you're not in Britain anymore, Voldemort."*

Dark lords are prickly. All of them. So arrogant. So tall. So ready to insult and dominate.

This Norwegian one sneers at Voldemort, unimpressed.

Sirius' wand is at the man's throat in the blink of an eye. He doesn't even remember standing, a hot fury inside him, making his ears ring.

"Mind your fucking tongue," he growls, digging his wand deeper in that proud neck.

Everyone in the room reacts, wands are drawn, voices get loud. Sirius ignores them, staring into cold grey eyes, tinted with red. Sirius wants to rip this vermin apart, piece by piece-

A hand on his shoulder, long fingers reassuring. His name, spoken in Voldemort's soft voice.

"Perhaps it's wiser if we reconvene tomorrow," Lucius says, a little to his right, and Sirius can focus again now, the buzzing in his ears subsiding.

"Put away your wand," Voldemort orders in his ear, and Sirius almost doesn't, he's so angry. But Voldemort's fingers tighten over his shoulder, and Sirius finally moves his wand away.

"Black temper." Lucius is still talking to the other foreigners. "I'm sure you've heard of Blacks. They can't help themselves."

The Norwegian dark lord keeps Sirius' gaze, steady. "An apology, and it will be forgotten," the man says.

Sirius laughs. "I agree. ***You*** *apologise and I will forget it."*

They were kicked out of the room, banished from their shitty castle.

Sirius has never been more in tune with Padfoot, even if he's not Padfoot at the moment. He wants to turn around, to curse, stab, bite those arseholes. To protect Voldemort.

Who needs no protection.

He doesn't know what to do; Sirius always wanted to protect those closest to him, but Voldemort doesn't need it.

Once more, he realises he has nothing to offer to Voldemort. He doesn't need Sirius' protection, he despises gold and wealth, and it makes him feel useless and insecure.

But no one taught him how to deal with those feelings- Blacks aren't useless or insecure, so he has no idea what to do with it, how to process it.

Unsurprisingly, they morph inside him, turn into aggression, which was always so easy to fall back onto.

Sirius' blood is boiling; he never reacted well to insults- *they didn't insult you*, a small part of his brain tries to remind him.

It feels like they did, though. It feels the same way it feels if someone were to insult his family. It brings the same mind clouding rage, the desire to punish someone.

Voldemort is mad, too. His eyes are burning against his pale face, his jaw is a tense, straight line. Even his robe seems mad, flowing behind him ominously. The candles on the walls flicker as he passes them by.

When they turn the corner, they stumble over a guard, and Voldemort' fingers close around Sirius' elbow, anticipating that Sirius would be more than happy to pour out his fury on whoever happens in his way.

He drags Sirius after him, down the stairs.

Sirius makes a Padfoot like noise, a growl, so authentic it makes him question if he's turned by mistake. He hadn't, he's still human, and he wretches his arm out of Voldemort's grip.

Sadly, when no stranger or enemy was around to take Sirius' ire, Sirius turned on the nearest person, even if he didn't want to, even if they were friends or family.

Poor Regulus was the one that got it the most, in their home, where Sirius couldn't snap at anyone else. When their father angered Sirius, and he couldn't snap at Father, felt small and powerless to even try it, when their mother was unlikely to take Sirius' outbursts in stride, Sirius turned on Regulus. Or Kreacher- whoever was closest.

He'd regret it, once the rage passed, but he never stopped, because it made him feel in control, made him feel less powerless.

When it was his mother's turn to feel powerless, when his father angered her, she'd turn on Sirius, and even if Sirius understood why, even if he tried to just shut up and take it, to tell himself it had nothing to do with him, that she didn't actually hate him, but his father, he couldn't stop himself from reacting.

Probably because while he realised what was happening by the time he was a teenager, he was old enough to read between the lines, he hadn't *always* been aware. Long years, as a stupid little child, he thought his mother hated him, despised him, that everything he did was wrong and upset her, and he couldn't fix it, no matter how he tried to appease her.

He'd been so confused, because if they went on holiday without their father for a week or two, she wouldn't scream at him, she seemed to love him again, to have patience, but then his father would join them, or they'd return home, and she's start again. Sirius tried to think back

on their holiday, to remember how he acted then, emulate that behaviour, because it seemed she liked it, but, of course, he was doomed to fail. He was too small to associate her moods with his father's presence. By the time he realised, he'd grown too resentful of her to make any difference.

Sirius attempts to rein in his aggression, reminds himself it's not helpful or fair to snap at Voldemort.

It's difficult; Sirius doesn't have much experience with restraint, not when his anger is involved. But he's trying- he's been trying for a while now, because Voldemort deserves better. So Sirius decided he'll at least attempt to control his combative, aggressive attitude that can come suddenly and unexpectedly.

He's trying now, fists clenched, teeth grinding against each other so hard he's already experiencing the beginning stages of a tension headache.

When they exist the castle, Voldemort stops walking. "Return to the vila," he orders.

"My lord," Lucius agrees, with a sharp incline of his head, and then he Disapparates fast, as if he wanted nothing more than to leave, and was waiting for permission.

"Go," Voldemort almost snaps at Sirius. Certainly, his tone is harder than he ever used it with Sirius.

That's why Lucius looked so eager to fuck off. This must be Pissed Off Voldemort.

"That is an order, Sirius."

Sometimes Sirius forgets his *place*. Sure, they are…whatever they are, they fuck, they share a bed, they share a meal and sometimes something close to tender moments, but Sirius is a Death Eater and Voldemort is his-

He can't think of him as Master. It is too much. *My boss,* Sirius thinks. Not much better, it still places Sirius under Voldemort, but more bearable than master.

There's no hope of containing his anger now. It grows, takes hold over his entire being, but Voldemort stares him down, and they're in enemy territory, Sirius shouldn't start a fight with him.

Voldemort doesn't need him there, doesn't want him there.

Well, fuck that, Sirius thinks. *Fuck that, and fuck his orders.*

Blacks do what they want, not what they are told.

He Disapparates with a crack, only Sirius doesn't go back to the vila Lucius procured for them.

He reappears just a couple of miles away, enough for Voldemort to think him gone.

Two miles is nothing when he turns into Padfoot and runs back towards the castle. The wards are nothing. They didn't ward against dogs. Not even Hogwarts' great wards register animagi. Notoriously tricky for any warding spell to detect them.

Grimmauld is protected, but only because his father was the most accomplished Charms Master in two centuries and more than a bit paranoid about security.

These second rate dark wizards aren't.

Padfoot's superior senses are only enhanced by the adrenaline, the aggression, the fight instinct taking over his every cell.

He easily detects where everyone is. He can smell Voldemort, advancing slowly, on the second floor, his low heart beats easy to miss if Padfoot wouldn't be so in tune with that heart, if it didn't have the same heart rate at the Horcrux Sirius wears. Voldemort probably flew back into the castle through an open window.

The bastards are still on the first floor, in the same room they met.

Sirius takes the guard by the staircase out, easily. There's no thought to it. Hide in the shadows, body low, advancing slowly, and then, when he's close enough -jump, bite, teeth sinking into his neck, in the place where blood rushes strongest, keep biting as the guard struggles and then it's all over.

The smell and taste of blood only enhances Padfoot's aggression.

He takes the stairs, almost flying in his speed. He's just turning the corner on the first floor when he sees the spells in the air.

It's *beautiful*. Aggression forgotten, panting, he stares at Voldemort. It's such a delight, a pure enlightenment, to see him like this.

Sirius never saw him truly duel someone. Sure, there was that thing in Diagon when he mowed over the Aurors, and then there are the mock duels they have every other day now, but this-

This is different. These are not Aurors, but dark wizards.

Clearly more powerful than Sirius believed them to be, because they put up a good fight.

Sirius has no clue what the fuck is going between all those curses flying around, dizzyingly fast, magic high in the air, but he knows Voldemort is beautiful.

The other men are powerful too, obviously well trained and educated-they represent the apex of human performance in both magic and skill, whereas Voldemort represents demi-divinity. The most well-trained man is always a step behind a god.

Voldemort should rule the world, the universe- he deserves it. He deserves it because he conquered magic.

It is always said magic chooses wizard-kind as vessels, but Voldemort is no mere vessel- Voldemort is magic, in its purest, most perfect form.

Six men surround him, but they're not making any headway. They aren't yet backing down, which is formidable in itself, but their spells don't connect with Voldemort.

Perhaps Voldemort is right- they often argue about the best magical numbers, the most powerful. Sirius is old fashioned, he believes in the Rule of Three, but Voldemort abides by the Law of Sevenths.

With the six wizards surrounding him, and Voldemort in the middle, magic is strong in that circle, lending more power to *everyone*'s curses. Even Sirius, outside of it, feels it. It makes his fur stand up, it makes him mad with bloodlust, high with power.

Sirius decides to break it up. He's always been a good duellist, one of the best in his generation, and he knows he's becoming stronger than ever, under Voldemort's tutelage.

Yet even his arrogance doesn't delude him into imagining he can be a match for any of these far older, more experienced men.

He charges, speed and the element of surprise on his side. Padfoot is strong, more agile than a human, and he picked his target wisely. His teeth sink into a neck once more, blood sweet and metallic on his tongue, and the momentum carries both of them through a window, glass shattering, shards piercing through the wizards's skin, but having no luck getting past Padfoot's fur.

The fall itself is exhilarating. Sirius always loved flying. When they crash, Sirius feels no pain, adrenaline the sweetest drug, better than any muggle one, better than any potion.

Padfoot is indestructible, sharp teeth, long claws, powerful jaws, thick skin.

The man is already dead, even if some life still pumps weakly through his veins. His neck is mauled, blood everywhere, pulse diminishing, faint, dying, dying, wasting away fast.

Sirius growls, locks his jaws in place, digs his paws into barely moving shoulders.

He only needs to wait it out, and he does. A predator knows patience and determination when a prey's neck is under his jaws.

Soon, there is no more struggling, just feeble spasming,

"I told you to leave."

Startled, Sirius lets go. It's safe to do so. The man is no longer a threat, he knows. The pulse is almost entirely gone, blood no longer spraying from his slashed open carotids, but coming out sluggish, colder.

He turns into a man, and not at his own will. It's not a pleasant experience. Sirius never felt it before, there was no one else to force him into his human form in the past.

It leaves him dizzy, achy. Or maybe he's hurting from the fall. He can't remember who took the brunt of it.

"I-" The metallic taste in his mouth is suddenly *overwhelming*. He spits out, but he worries he ingested some when he was Padfoot. Impossible not to, what with the way it was splashing all over.

His face is wet, sticky. His hair. He can only smell blood.

He swallows, a bit panicked; his human sensibilities differ from Padfoot's simpler conscience.

He looks at Voldemort and it grounds him, like the sight of him always does.

His presence is so overpowering that Sirius forgets all his petty issues as soon as he sets his eyes on him.

"I didn't want you to be alone," Sirius says, mind still struggling to adjust from the sudden, forced shift, from a proud predator killing his prey, revelling in all the blood, to Sirius, who's a bit nauseous.

Voldemort is bloody, too, and it makes his eyes redder. He's not drenched, like Sirius, but red splatters are all over his robe, some on his face.

It's not his blood, Sirius knows.

"I sent you and Lucius away so you won't distract me; so you won't get hurt."

"I'm not hurt, you weren't distracted, so everything is fine."

The man finally dies beside him, with a wet, gurgling noise. Sirius looks at him, at what a *horrid* mess that neck is, and his stomach turns, guilt and revulsion swirling inside.

But Voldemort is there, right there, in his space now, touching Sirius, and everything else disappears.

He grabs Sirius' face, and his fingers feel slick with blood, almost slipping on Sirius' jaw, turns his head so he stops looking at the corpse.

Yet Voldemort's gaze lingers on Padfoot's handiwork, a pleased glint dancing in his eyes; he smiles, a vicious sight.

"I've dreamed of this," he says. "Ever since you turned at Greyback's son's wedding, when you faced off a hundred werewolves, snarling, teeth out, no fear, just savage - I dreamed what damage you could inflict, even without a wand."

The damage is *substantial*. Sirius doesn't look again, but he thinks he'll dream of it, too. Or maybe he won't.

The sight of the torn out, mauled throat easily ranks up in the top three most messed up things he'd seen, and he'd seen some pretty disgusting things

But maybe it won't bother him.

He had it coming. Anyone that insults Voldemort has it coming and Sirius should deliver the punishment.

He dreams of me, Sirius thinks. He shivers. Voldemort is all dark magic, thrumming around him, poisoning the air itself, but what a sweet poison it is. Sirius took it in small doses ever since he was a child and his parents or grandparents or a crazy aunt or uncle would perform a dark ritual.

Grimmauld itself is made with dark magic, traces of it in its walls. People say it makes them feel unwelcome, that it's creepy, cold.

For Sirius, it is home.

It's his father, feeding the blood wards, showing Sirius how to do it, when the day would come for it to be his duty.

It's his mother and Bella, chanting on Beltane, powerful whispers, calling onto goddesses of magic.

It's the odd corner of the house that seems *alive*; the odd room Sirius was not allowed to enter as a child. Magic so dark had been performed in those places that it left traces, even dozens of years down the line.

"If one survives this house, one can survive everything outside of it," great-grandfather Sirius used to say. *"The toughest enemy a Black has to withstand is our own blood, boy. Make peace with it, pray the coin landed on the good side the night you were born, and you will be indestructible. Do not run from it, because one cannot outrun the blood in one's veins. It will catch up, sooner rather than later."*

Voldemort kisses him.

"I appreciate the sentiment," he says, biting Sirius' lip. "However, I don't need your support."

"You have it, anyway," Sirius cuts over him.

It's unusual. What's a guard dog to do when the shepard is stronger than him? When it can defeat the wolf on its own? When the sheep don't matter, for the dog or for the shepard?

Voldemort kisses him again, fingers tight on Sirius' face.

And then they're outside the villa Lucius procured for them.

They move at once for the door. Sirius doesn't want to part with him, tries to touch him again, but Voldemort keeps him at a distance.

“Patience.”

Why?

Oh. He remembers why when they enter and Lucius stands. “My lo-“ but he shuts up, trailing off, his usually blank eyes wide at the sight of them, all bloodied.

Or maybe it’s the dark magic that clings to Voldemort that shuts Lucius up. He lowers his eyes, head bowed when they pass by him. Malfoy Manor is made by dark magic, too, after all. Lucius knows to detect it, understands its power.

And our elders wonder why we are drawn to Voldemort, when he is ***home*** *for all of us; we were raised with static, with dim whispers in our ears, with a presence there, always around, since the crib.*

Sirius is trailing blood all over those expensive carpets, all the way up the stairs, to Voldemort’s room.

The sheets turn red as soon as they stumble into bed. Their clothes disappear, fast, and he doesn’t know which one of them was responsible for it. The air between them smells metallic, like death and life and magic.

Sirius’s body sings with pleasure, a rush of power coursing through him. Voldemort’s, or his own, it hardly matters. Sirius wants to hold on to the feeling, to always feel this strong, this alive.

“Don’t be mad,” Sirius says, biting at Voldemort’s lips. “I just didn’t want you to be alone,” he repeats. He can’t properly convey how much Sirius needs Voldemort to never feel alone again; how often he thinks about Tom Riddle growing up alone.

“My gallant Gryffindor.” Voldemort doesn’t sound mad, but he sounds heated.

He’s on top of Sirius, his eyes are almost shining, pure red for once, no trace of brown.

“What can I do to you?”

“Anything,” Sirius urges. “Everything.” He reaches out, grabs Voldemort’s arm and pulls him until he collapses over Sirius. “Fuck me.”

The ring thrums on his finger, and Sirius feels the heartbeat there, picking up in the rhythm of war drums, matching Sirius’ frantic pulse.

But Voldemort slows down, as he always does, when he’s the one leading.

Sirius wants more, faster, *now* and yet he feels so cherished, so wanted, Voldemort taking his time, kissing and licking every part of Sirius.

His magic stays around him, dark and threatening, but calm. Perhaps that’s why it’s so powerful, because it’s constant, controlled, unlike Sirius’ wild one.

Sirius can't taste blood anymore, Voldemort's tongue chased it away from his mouth, and all Sirius can taste is safety and care.

But the blood is there, on the sheets, in their hair, on Sirius' shoulders; the after effects of dark magic linger, a reminder of power.

Sirius never felt more powerful in his life; and, for once, it's not because of his name, of his bloodline, of his ancestors. Sirius feels powerful in his own right.

He feels male, from his hard cock to the tips of his hairs, the victory of the night singing under his skin, the blood of the enemies he defeated right there on his skin, proof of his dominion over them.

This is why men go to war, it occurs to him, an epiphany that long evaded him.

Because it feels good.

What is alcohol and music and naked women compared to fighting for one's life, with no rules, no politeness, no lies, nothing to detract from a man's nature, and the only goal that matters- victory.

"No." Voldemort stops him when Sirius tries to turn around, offer his back to Voldemort. He's *ready*, he wants so much, and Voldemort's long fingers are not enough anymore. "I want to see you."

You always see me. Voldemort saw Sirius, understood him, from the second they met. Not just flesh and bones and pretty eyes, but *him*.

Voldemort enters him slowly, with a gentleness so at odds with the violence he enacted just half an our before on those wizards.

It feels strange, but not unnatural. Not shameful, as Sirius feared it would feel. The magic inside them approves of it, the mark on Sirius' arm, the ring on his finger- are all in agreement that this is right.

Sirius doesn't feel vulnerable at all; it's Voldemort's breath that hitches, his eyes that close, tightly, his voice that hisses something in a language only he can understand.

Sirius' legs may be parted, but when he wraps them around Voldemort's hips, he feels the furthest thing from weak or submissive.

Voldemort says his name, like a prayer, and his eyes snap open, his fingers tighten in Sirius' hair, hard, but never hard enough to hurt.

There's something so arousing in knowing what Voldemort *feels* as he slides deeper inside him; something complete in now finding out how Voldemort feels when Sirius is the one that fucks him.

Sirius could never share this with a woman.

It's intense and strange and new, but Sirius gives himself to it, wholly, embraces it, takes pleasure in it, because he can take whatever the fuck he wants. He earned it. He owes nothing, to anyone.

It's just him and Voldemort in a bubble of dark magic, souls intertwined just as much as their bodies.

He reaches between them, wraps his fingers around his cock, a more familiar sensation, to complement the foreign one.

"I'm not going to break," he whispers, voice rough, deep, when Voldemort draws back, oh so slowly, only to thrust back in, even *slower*.

Voldemort breathes in, seeks Sirius' eyes, stares at him, intelligence beyond measure glinting behind his eyes.

"Perhaps I will," he says, and then he captures Sirius' lips in a hungry kiss.

Sirius thought no pleasure could be as sharp, as deep, as when Voldemort' fingers brushed his prostate, but he was mistaken- it's far sharper when Voldemort's cock finds it, after a couple more experimental thrusts.

He wasn't tense- or he doesn't think he was- but he feels his muscles giving in further when pleasure travels from his spine to his toes, in a straight current.

He disrupts all Voldemort's attempts to go slow; Sirius figures out quickly how to meet the thrusts head on, how to snap his hips up, when Voldemort fucks in.

He hisses again, above Sirius.

Sirius is excited for him; in the part of his brain that isn't completely overcome by lust, by the fire spreading up his spine, he's excited Voldemort finally gets to experience this, for the first time, how right it is to have someone' flesh part for him, welcome him in.

And he's learning it with me. I'm his first, with everything.

Only me.

Voldemort groans, a deep sound, and Sirius thrills at hearing it, thrills in feeling Voldemort tremble, slightly.

Sirius throws his head back on the pillow. It's so intense, it's almost unbearable, past unbearable, but in the most brilliant sort of ways.

Everything in the room not bolted to the wall is moving, responding to the magic dripping from them both.

Sirius's vision goes black and blurry and back to crystal clear. He wraps his fingers in Voldemort's hair, pulling hard, trying to ground himself somehow.

Voldemort comes, stilling above Sirius, breath hitched. The chandelier shatters, a shower of crystals falls, catching the light of the raising sun, casting a palette of colour on the walls. No shards reach them, though they were directly under it.

Sirius comes a second after him, the Horcrux, that was always cold, is now hot on his already burning skin, a heartbeat so strong Sirius wonders if it will just explode.

A ray of sunshine spills over the bed. Voldemort collapses on top of him.

Sirius is almost unconscious.

“No one ever stood up for me,” Voldemort whispers in his ear.

Bunch of cowards and useless folk Voldemort encountered in his life so far. But now he has Sirius.

It’s unthinkable to him not to stand up for Voldemort.

Padfoot agrees, deep inside. He’d kill for Voldemort, protect him, die for him.

(-)

“Lily, have you heard something about someone named Jack and some magic beans that take you to the sky where you meet a giant or something like that?”

Lily laughs. James has the same confused expression all the Death Eaters had when Sirius first inquired about the beans.

“You’re adorable,” she says, petting her stomach, her feet up on the coffee-table. “What, you’re reading muggle fairytales now? Changed your mind about how dangerous they will be for the baby?”

A fucking fairy tale! Gods, Voldemort makes the most puzzling muggle references ever. Really, a fairytale.

Lily recounts the tale, which only reinforces Sirius’ beliefs that muggles and their stories should be held at bay. Though, unlike the other ones he heard, where the little heroes are innocent and it’s the witches and step mothers that are evil, this Jack is a fucking thief.

Voldemort probably liked him, Sirius thinks, rolling his eyes. He, too, is a thief.

Sirius can’t wait to mock him about the story; it’s not often that Sirius is so eager to leave the Potters, but now he’s fishing for excuses to flee, so he can return to the cabin.

And then Sirius asks Lily if she knows who ‘Sandman’ is. To his luck, she does.

Also from children's stories. A creature that puts people to sleep and inspires pleasant dreams by sprinkling magical dust in their eyes.

Somehow, when Sirius finally sees Voldemort again, the urge to mock him over Jack has disappeared entirely.

Instead, after dinner, Sirius puts on the record with the ladies. Voldemort is already seated behind his desk, and Sirius goes to him, sits on the corner of the desk, and when Voldemort looks up, Sirius grins.

“Am I the cutest dream?” he asks, with a practiced, seductive look.

He expected Voldemort to laugh or give an exasperated sigh, like he sometimes does when Sirius acts foolishly. But Voldemort tilts his head, eyes roaming all over Sirius, and he seems to take the question far too seriously.

I’m so alone, don’t have nobody to call my own, the girls sing, voices and melody hitting a happy tempo, even if the lyrics are not happy at all.

“Even the Sandman couldn’t come up with someone like you,” Voldemort answers and, just like that, the stupid song becomes Sirius’ favourite.

(-)

“He’s perfect,” Sirius whispers, in awe. Draco is so *tiny*. He sits on the edge of the bed, terrified his knees would fail him and he’d drop Draco.

He’s clean, and swaddled in no doubt the most expensive baby blanket on earth. He’s sleeping, and Sirius almost hated him a bit, for the past sixteen hours, as he waited downstairs, with his family and the Malfoys, and heard Narcissa’s screams, more and more pained.

He never could bear to hear his cousins in pain, especially Narcissa, who never showed pain or weakness or any type.

But now Draco is sleeping, and he’s in Sirius’ arms, perfect skin, smelling like innocence, and Sirius adores him, feels the call of blood already.

“He truly is,” Bella whispers, sitting beside Sirius. Lucius would no doubt protest to this lack of decorum, Bella and Sirius sitting on Narcissa’ bed. But, for once, he’s not interested about that, hovering over Sirius, looking happier than…well, Sirius never saw him smiling like that.

He barley parted with the baby for long enough to give him to Sirius.

“So beautiful,” Bella says, chocked up. “Even with that hair.”

Narcissa snorts, tiredly. Though she does not look tired. Oh, no. She's not allowed. No matter she was in labour for sixteen hours, gave birth- she was allowed an hour to herself and Lucius, to get clean and moved to her rooms, where he will receive the family.

Sirius and Bella came first- well, Bella was beside Cissa for the entire labour, but now Sirius joined them. They will be Draco's Guardians, and that takes precedent, even over the grandfathers.

Draco's hair is white-blonde, a small, soft tuff of it. Sirius is already convinced no other baby was born as beautiful.

They sit in silence for a while, passing the baby between them- Lucius hogs Draco, really, before they can't delay any longer.

Lucius subdues his smile, though, for once, he can't quite manage to look unaffected. Narcissa plasters a radiant smile on her face, and Sirius and Bella leave, letting Cygnus and Abraxas into the room.

His mother already left; she, too, had been with Narcissa all throughout the labour, as had been Druella.

He knows his mother is…weird around babies, but she put whatever feelings or unpleasant memories aside, and came to help Cissa, but left as soon as Draco was born.

Druella- Gods know where his aunt went. He's surprised she managed to pull herself together to be of any help to her youngest daughter, though he did hear the elf saying she fainted at some point, when the little thing came to inform the men of what was happening upstairs, every other hour.

Sirius is tired, and he did nothing but pace around with Lucius, smoking and drinking, trying to tune out Abraxas and Cygnus.

It was draining, being in that room with both of them, for so long. He would have left, waited outside in the gardens, but he took pity on Lucius and struggled through the experience, unwilling to let his friend endure those two arseholes on his own.

Yet now he's exhausted. Unguarded. Sensitive, even; no doubt Draco is at fault for all these emotions.

He pulls Bella into a guest chamber, dragging her by the elbow.

"What?" she asks, when he shuts the door behind them. But she doesn't look surprised.

Just a tad worried.

They haven't talked in so long; not more than a few words, in any case. They avoided each other. Sirius was trying to avoid her for a while, but after the ring, she was avoiding him, too. As soon as they'd find themselves alone in a room, one of them would quickly find a reason to depart.

Sirius breathes in deeply. Exhales. He opens his mouth, closes it again, because he can't-

Once he says it, it's real.

And it's bad. He doesn't want it to be real.

Why is it bad? It feels good.

It might, but he knows it can't be good.

He needs Bella to tell him …something. To- he's not sure. He just needs her.

She waits, patiently, looking up at him, her dark eyes seeing right into his soul, as always.

"I think I love him," he whispers.

It sounds utterly terrifying.

Bella sighs.

"Why the face?" he asks, instantly hostile. "You worship him, right? Everyone does. So what's the problem?"

She's not making any faces, but just that sigh… it sounded wary. Concerned.

"You," she says. "You are the problem." She bites her lip. "It is natural to love him. I can't imagine who wouldn't, really. But he is-" she bites her lip again. "I am not sure to what extent he can reciprocate."

Sirius does not like to hear it. Though, of course, he knows what she means.

Yet- yet he still hopes. Voldemort is so incredibly patient with Sirius, puts up with all his shit, in a way no one, not even Bella, ever did.

Surely, there must be *something* there.

"And none of us expect him to. But *you*- well. You have different needs." She touches his face, and he leans into it, because yeah- he does need to be loved. *Completely*. To be the most loved, to be a priority for someone.

After his father died, only Bella remained to love him above all others.

James has Lily, and soon the baby. His mother has Regulus. Sirius will never be a priority there.

It was hard to deprive himself of Bella's love for so long.

"I know you are upset with me," she says, which is an understatement. The fury passed, but the heartbreak remains. He loves her, he wants to protect her, see her happy, but like a dog that's been kicked too many times by his owner, he can't truly trust her like he used to. "But you must understand, that if - that is to say-" she stumbles over her words. "If you have a

problem- with him, I mean- if-" She bites her lip again, harder this time, leaving imprints in that soft, plump, red flesh. "You must tell me if you feel unsafe. If he- if you don't like something but you feel you can't get out, you must tell me."

It's hard for her, it is obvious. To even imply that her adored lord would be capable of doing something she doesn't approve of.

He laughs. "And what would you do?"

More lip biting, until her lip bleeds. Her fingers clench at her side. She looks pained, but her eyes are determined. "Whatever I need to," she whispers, eventually. "You are my blood, my little cousin. I would- no one hurts my family. Not even- You must come to me, no matter if you convinced yourself you hate me or something equally absurd."

It's not something he ponders over often, if at all, but, deep down, Sirius knows how great the power imbalance between him and Voldemort is.

No matter how patient Voldemort acts, no matter how he always smiles at Sirius, goes along with all of his lunacies-

There is that knowledge there, buried but impossible to dismiss, that Sirius is at his mercy.

He never felt that way before- well, he did. After his father died, Sirius looked at the men in his family, and he realised he was now at his grandfather's mercy, at Cygnus'. He couldn't bear it. One more reason to send him fleeing.

But if those men let him go, Voldemort won't, if he isn't so inclined. There will be no fleeing.

'No', Voldemort said in that dream Sirius had. It was only a dream, yet…yet it could so easily be a reality.

Voldemort himself said it, when Sirius was upset with him over the kneeling business and didn't answer Voldemort's call.

"I am not Dumbledore. I'm not a bored supervisor at the Ministry or an undemanding owner of a store you work at. You will not ignore me, Sirius. You have my Mark- when I call you, you either come or you better run far away."

Bella looks at him, eyes steady, and her fingers wrap around his own, a *promise*, even if she's flushed, even if it costs her a lot to even hint at ever going against her beloved lord.

She's just a woman, he thinks. Sure, an incredibly powerful woman, one of the greatest duellists in the country, but she's just as useless against Voldemort as anyone else is.

Still, it's not a matter of logic. For Sirius, even if now he's almost two heads taller than her, even if his magical power will soon match hers- even outmatch if he keeps studying and practicing the Arts- for him, she will forever be his big cousin that can do *anything*. That could get Sirius out of whatever trouble he found.

“I worry he doesn’t want me enough,” he confesses, bothered by how Voldemort doesn’t react, doesn’t get jealous. “But then I also worry that if he wants me enough, and I stop wanting him…”

“You’re a basket case,” she says, but not unkindly. There’s no judgment there. There wouldn’t be. She’s just as mad as he is. “That is why I worry. You aren’t normal, you’re too intense, and so is he, and-” she sighs. “Well, we’ll deal with whatever comes our way, I suppose. Nothing left to do.”

“It’s good,” Sirius tells her, and if feels even better when he can fucking talk to someone about it. “It’s really good. Perfect. I just- well, you know me. I don’t trust good things.”

“He- in his pursuit of power, he sacrificed a…hmm, part of him that is otherwise considered vital. I don’t know if one can love, after that,” she says, hesitating. “I don’t want you to hope for something that could…disappoint you.”

“After a Horcrux, you mean?”

She closes her eyes. “Please, please tell me he told you about it, that it wasn’t you figuring it out on your own.”

“He told me,” he says, just to spare her of stress. “He told me he confided in you, too. Though we’re not to speak about it.”

“Then we won’t speak about it.”

“That’s the thing, though. I know he-” Sirius can’t describe how Voldemort treats him, how tender and gentle he is. How good for Sirius. How he looks at Sirius in the morning, or when they just sit around in the cabin together. There is something there. It’s not just fucking, it never was for Voldemort. But if it’s not love, then it’s obsession.

And while Sirius wants Voldemort to love him, to want him, to pine over him, he also knows it’s not ideal to be the subject of obsession of such an incredibly powerful man.

“I’m not worried,” he switches thoughts, mid sentence. “I’m not. Not *truly*. I’m happy. But I just wanted to talk to you, I suppose.”

In fact, it is her reaction that made him worry a bit. Her silence. Her caution. She threw no tantrums. She didn’t seem happy. She didn’t seem unhappy, either. Bella did her best to be silent, to hide her emotions, and Bella never does that, so the fact that she did only cemented how serious this could get, how *ugly*, if things were to go poorly in the future.

She nods. “It’s good that you did.” She sighs one last time, but then she smiles up at him. “It’s good that you are happy. And that you know you are not alone. For as long as I breathe, Sirius, you are not alone in this world.”

He smiles back.

“When I was little, long before you were born, Uncle Orion would treat me as his daughter. He and Auntie would take me on holidays, spoil me, act like I was so special and important. I

loved going on holiday with them, and when Father and Mother were too unbearable, I'd run away to spend time with your parents. Once, I was upset, because I heard yet another fight between Father and Mother, how she couldn't give him an heir, a son, but gave him three useless girls. I think Uncle must have heard it, too, because he came to find me on the balcony. He pointed Orion to me, up in the sky, the soldier, the hunter, proud and eternal. And then he singled out Bellatrix. *'See,'* he said. *'That is where the shield starts.'*"

Her eyes get wet, her voice shakes. "He said Bellatrix is the shield that protects the entire constellation. I know he didn't mean it, we all know he thought women were a sort of precious, important property to protect and care for, that he only said it as a kindness to his favourite niece, but I have never again felt useless after that. It stuck with me, forever, that I *do* have a purpose. I already would have done anything for my sisters, even before he said that, but it just filled me with conviction. That conviction stayed with me. Everything I do is for us, for our family. For the women in our family, so they can have a choice, but also for the men. To make Father proud, and to make sure you and Regulus will keep the position of power that you were born into, that you will always be above any Minister or any mudblood, or any filth that tries to interfere with our way of life. No one is above you." She kisses him, a light press of her lips against his. He can taste the blood she shed, with all the biting. "*No one*, Sirius. I will protect my family, or die trying."

(-)

They do the ritual on the seventh day of the Draco's birth.

It's not a requirement that it's done outside, but both Bella and Sirius insist on it, since they want the stars to bear witness.

Lucius is already so irrational with protecting his baby that he mutters some nonsense about Draco catching a *cold*, of all things.

Narcissa just shakes her head in silent disbelief at her husband.

The Ministry would call it dark magic, but it's not. It's old, though. And even the Ministry made an exception for the ritual, a lawful practice.

Lily won't allow it, though. James tried to suggest it, but she was horrified, and James immediately agreed that yes, it is quite *'out there'*. It's not just the dark magic she took issue with, but she called it 'unhygienic' and 'dangerous for the baby'. Muggle nonsense.

"Love, we need to be a bit further away," Narcissa says, so very patient, dragging Lucius back.

Bella makes a face, places Draco gently on the ritual table Abraxas provided.

“Who’s the most beautiful boy?” she coos, getting Draco’s arm free of his nightshirt. “My most perfect boy?”

“Me,” Sirius answers, making her laugh.

“Cousin Sirius is jealous,” she tells Draco, tracing her wand down his arm, numbing it. “So we’ll just say he’s my most beautiful boy, and you’re my most beautiful baby boy. That’s alright with you, Sirius?”

“I guess I’ll have to accept it.”

Draco lifts his free arm, tries to grab Bella’s hair, but she catches it tenderly, kisses his tiny fingers, and with her other hand she grabs the ritual knife and passes it to Sirius.

He takes it, makes a small cut on Draco’s arm, who doesn’t feel it, busy staring up at Bella, making those adorable baby sounds.

Sirius slashes his own hand, after, right across the palm, a deeper, longer cut. He takes Draco’s arm in his hand, and promises to care for him, protect him, take on any fatherly duties in Lucius’ absence. He swears to never hurt him, never turn him away.

“Pass the protection in my veins, into his,” he finishes the ritual, and he feels the current of magic sealing through them.

Draco scrunches up his face, gives a sharp cry.

“No, no, no,” Bella coos, taking the knife from Sirius, slashing her palm. “Blacks don’t cry. No, we don’t, handsome. My brave boy.” She takes his arm, too, blood mingling, and promises as Sirius did.

She adds some more, because she’s always been extra.

“Your enemies shall be mine own,” she swears, before passing her protection onto him. “There you go, almost done, no need to cry.” She heals his little wound, and then they both take some of that blood, draw runes with it. Sirius does the one above his head, and Bella does the one besides his heart.

“What are they doing?” Lucius asks, from a little away.

“Shh, it’s a special Black thing,” Cissa calms him.

“But they did-“

“Lucius, shut up!”

Sirius feels the stars, feels them *watching*. Bella shivers beside him; she feels them, too.

Something all Blacks can do, runic astral wards of protection.

Who knows what they are worth, how much they do protect, but at least no one that had them done for them as babies died before seventeen, when the protection breaks, alongside Guardianship.

They are working, because Sirius feels it, Bella feels it, Draco feels it, cries harder.

And then the runes shine, blood red, yet *white* for a second, and then it's done.

Lucius is there in a second, fussing over Draco, checking him, cradling him.

"He's going to make Draco a weakling if he keeps on like that," Bella hisses, as they walk back to the Manor.

"He's just very protective," Cissa argues, with a fond, even if exasperated, smile aimed at Lucius' back.

Sirius was never sure if she truly loved Lucius. It was her duty to appear that she loves him, it was in her best interest to seem like she does.

But now, Sirius knows that she does love him, even if maybe she didn't, before. That she surely fell in love, witnessing how absolutely devoted Lucius is to their son.

Hells, *Sirius* is half in love with Lucius when he sees how gentle he is with Draco.

Nothing greater on earth than a father that loves his son.

(-)

It's quite different when Harry is born. Sirius and James are allowed to stay with Lily at St Mungo's, in her room, at least for parts of it.

Instantly, Sirius realises that he prefers it the old-fashioned way; that he'd rather hang out with insufferable Abraxas and Cygnus, and pace around the hallways, because it's far harder to see Lily in discomfort. It makes him feel so useless, to have her in such tremendous pain, without anything he could do to help. But, as he suffered those old fools in order not to leave Lucius alone with them, he stays with James, too, until Sirius is actually kicked out by a nurse, to his relief.

Not much longer after that, he hears a baby crying, and no more screams from Lily.

"Harry," James says, some half an hour later, placing Harry in Sirius' arms.

Harry is fucking perfect, as perfect as Draco. *Morgana's tits, what are they doing to kids these days, surely they can't all look this cute?*

Harry is adorable, with his black as ink hair, his scrunched-up face. His eyes are different, a cloudy, dark blue, as opposed to Draco's clear grey.

"Where did he get blue eyes from?" Sirius asks, confused.

"They'll change, dearie," a nurse tells him, busy with something in the background.

"Really?"

He knows Draco's won't- those are Black eyes, white-grey, star like. They'll stay like that, like Regulus' stayed exactly how they were when he was born.

James is just as bad as Lucius, even *worse*, crying non stop, smiling like a lunatic.

Lily cries, too, unlike Narcissa. She's allowed to sleep, unlike Narcissa. She's allowed to look tired.

There are no grandfathers there to demand access to their legacy.

Which- sure, it sucked for the Malfoys, because those are some horrid grandfathers, but …at least they were *there*. Draco was born surrounded by family. Aunts, great-aunts, one grandmother, two grandfathers, cousins. Two great families there to welcome him, to close ranks around him, impenetrable shields of relatives that will keep Draco safe, at least from outsiders.

Harry doesn't have that.

"You have me," Sirius whispers in his ear. *Promises*, really. James, Lily and Sirius will have to work extra hard to make up for the lack of an extended, big family.

And there comes Peter and Remus, with flowers, with chocolates.

"No, I'll drop him, no, no. You know I'm clumsy!" Peter whispers, not to wake Lily, when James hands Harry to him.

"Oh, shut up, you won't!"

Peter insists he's to sit down first, before he takes the baby.

And then Remus tries to refuse, too, because Remus thinks himself dirty, wallows in self hatred, in disgust at his own self, in fear of somehow contaminating those around him with his curse.

Now that Sirius hanged out with other werewolves, the difference is so stark.

The pride Greyback and the others have for their inner wolves, how much they treasure it, compared to how Remus despises himself.

"Moony," James barks at him, and Remus takes the kid, too, smiles softly at him.

Sirius feels better with the others there, even if he doesn't talk to Remus.

Harry does have an extended family, even if an …unusual one.

(-)

"Sorry," Sirius says, when he goes ho- when he goes to Voldemort's cabin, at the crack of dawn. Even if he isn't sure why he's apologising. Voldemort never asks him where he goes, never seems upset when Sirius shows up at midnight, or dawn, or whenever.

"Lily went into labour yesterday, so-"

Voldemort's jaw twitches. He looks to the calendar.

"What is it?" he asks.

"A boy. Harry." Sirius grins, tired but happy. He throws himself on the couch. Does Voldemort even try to sleep when Sirius isn't there? It's so late- so *early*- and yet Voldemort is at his desk, in his day robe, reading. "And then, as I was about to leave, we ran into Frank. Alice was in labour, too."

"I didn't know you were close with the Longbottoms, as well." Voldemort sounds irritated.

Perhaps he does mind when Sirius doesn't even let him know he'll be late?

"Oh, I'm not. Frank hates my guts. But Augusta caught sight of me, and she stopped me to brag about her grandbaby-"

"Girl or boy?"

"Also a boy," Sirius says, closing his eyes. "A happy night for two pureblood families. They got their heirs."

"One is not a pureblood."

"Oh, shut up," Sirius complains, and snuggles more comfortably into the couch.

Chapter End Notes

Beautiful art for the story:

https://www.tumblr.com/kazuza-art/726550373229346816/for-my-dear-metalomagnetic-cause-i-know-she-loves?source=share

https://www.tumblr.com/slagathormoon/733989505771651072/sirius-makes-an-embarrassing-noise-as-the-ground

Ok, so, this chapter, as long as it is, was supposed to end at a certain climax, but, as always, I lost track of the ridiculous word count. When I was done, it was close to 50k, so I had to split it up. I already have 15k written for the next part, so hopefully it will come out sooner rather than later.

This was one of the hardest chapters to write; I'm not sure why, it just gave me the most problems. Many times, I wanted to delete some scenes, but then changed my mind. Many scenes got deleted permanently, even if it took me so much effort to write.

Anyway, sorry for rambling, and I hope you'll enjoy what came out. If you do, please share your thoughts in the comments!

I am SO grateful for all the lovely comments I get! I know this chapter came very late, I didn't have the best of times in real life, but your comments gave me strength to work on it, even when I was in a slump.

Thank you! ❤️

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sirius arrives late for a Death Eater meeting at Lestrange Manor. He didn't think he'd make it, what with Lily's birthday, but Harry got a fever so they ended dinner early.

He arrives just as the meeting ends, and he sees the Death Eaters trailing out of the hallway leading to Rodolphus' office.

He senses something is wrong as soon as he sees Lucius' expression, a mixture of distaste and fear.

Sirius opens his mouth to inquire what happened, when Rabastan comes out carrying Avery on his shoulder.

Avery moans, twitches, shaking. The Cruciatus, Sirius knows.

They all seem in a hurry, Parkinson practically pushing Yaxley out of the way to get to the door, but not in a 'we were surprised and attacked by enemies' type of haste. No, if someone dared attack purebloods in Lestrange Manor, there would be fighting, not running.

Unless, of course-

Rabastan looks pretty angry; he refuses to meet Sirius' eyes as he takes a left and carries Avery up the stairs.

"Where were you?" Lucius demands.

"I- what?" Sirius asks, distracted, looking after Rabastan, at Avery's shaking form, his pitiful moans.

"You should join us more often," Lucius hisses. "Your presence has a…positive effect on all of us."

And then he saunters off, leaving Sirius rooted to the spot.

He knows what happened, then. It's pretty clear, but he just doesn't *want* to know it. He always refused to believe Voldemort actually tortures his own men, yet it's hard to deny it now.

Even worse, the implication that Voldemort doesn't do it when Sirius is there, the fact that *Lucius* knows this, that the blond realises Voldemort wants to hide that from Sirius- it's unnerving.

And then Voldemort himself comes out of the hallway, Rodolphus at his side, saying something in a hushed tone, more distance between them than there usually is. Even Bella,

fierce Bella, walks a bit behind.

Voldemort is angry. Proper angry, eyes glinting, jaws tense, no trace of warmth on his marble like features.

Until he sees Sirius, and surprise replaces the anger, and then smoothes away into nothing.

He smiles, and it would look genuine if only Sirius hadn't seen him smile a million times by now; he knows this is forced, even if he can't put his finger on what gives it away.

"Weren't you supposed to be at a party?"

A second, then two, pass in silence, as Sirius regains his bearings.

"Turns out parents make for boring hosts," Sirius offers, with a fake smile of his own.

"Goodnight," Voldemort says, clearly addressing the Lestranges, even if he doesn't look at them. He walks to the door, makes a gesture with his head at Sirius, to follow, and Sirius goes-

"Stay." Bella. Voice a tad high.

They both turn to her.

Rodolphus is sending her warning glances.

"I mean," she adds, clearing her voice. "Stay for dinner, Sirius. You look hungry."

"It's midnight," Voldemort's voice gets a dangerous type of flat.

She clearly doesn't want Sirius to leave with a pissed off Voldemort. Whatever happened in that room must not have been …a pretty sight.

It sends a shiver down Sirius' spine. Not many things frighten Bella. Even fewer things would make her defy Voldemort.

Rodolphus seems uncomfortable, glancing between a volatile Voldemort and Bellatrix. He moves himself between them, shielding Bella from that bloodshot gaze- he does it slowly, probably aiming for subtlety, but Rodolphus can't do subtle.

Voldemort's entire left side of the face twitches.

Sirius decides the best course of action is to remove him from Bella's presence.

"It's fine, I ate at the party," he says, and he marches to Voldemort. "Thanks for offering, though. Have a good night. Shall we?" He touches Voldemort's arm, carefully, and then Voldemort turns around again and they're through those damn doors after they take a few steps.

Out in the garden, Sirius breathes easier under the spring night sky; a bright half-moon, no clouds in sight, a gentle, pleasant wind playing with his hair.

When they Apparate to the cabin, Voldemort goes for the torture barn instead, without a word.

A bunch of snakes that were nestling around flee from his path, hissing loudly, agitated.

Sirius watches the barn door slamming shut behind Voldemort.

There's no noise at all, an eery silence; they're in a forest, and those are never silent. All sorts of animals and creatures chirping or moving around, making their presence known.

Now there's nothing once the snakes disappear from view, finding shelter under a bush.

Deadly silence, just an aura of danger and dark magic hanging all around, emanating from Voldemort like a fireplace emanates heat.

Sirius is not frightened of it; he actually likes the way magic clings to Voldemort, obeys his moods, surrounds him like a weapon.

Voldemort's magic, no matter how dark, how threatening, is very familiar to Sirius by now. It always was, it reminded him of Grimmauld from the first time he met Voldemort, but ever since he put the Horcrux on his finger, Voldemort's magic almost seems like his *own*; intimate and reliable.

He goes into the cabin, but he's too restless to read or play his guitar, or attempt to figure out the artefacts that can be found around, hidden in several places.

Voldemort is always amused when Sirius spends hours trying to dismantle the curses around them. And, on the very rare occasions Sirius succeeds, Voldemort looks …proud. Vexed, too, but there's approval in his eyes when he glances at Sirius.

When Sirius is mad, he usually rants at Voldemort, who either lets him, or calms him down with perfectly chosen words, spoken in the right tone.

Sadly, Sirius doesn't have this skill- besides, Voldemort won't rant at him, complain about whatever pissed him off. Well, clearly Avery pissed him off.

Avery has that talent, Sirius is quick to find an excuse. Truly, it's a wonder people don't torture him at all times. Who knows what he did to-

There's no excuse, something inside his brain tries to tell him. As always, that small voice, getting smaller every day, sounds like his father's.

I don't care about Avery, Sirius tells himself. And it's the truth. He doesn't.

He does worry, though, because it can't be just Avery, and it looks bad for Voldemort to torture his own supporters. It means he clearly isn't as patient or measured as Sirius thought him.

Sirius knows it isn't a healthy thought, yet he has it- somehow, the fact that Voldemort is prone to snapping, to the point of throwing the Cruciatus Curse at his followers, yet he never even so much as raises his voice at Sirius, makes Sirius feel a wave of warmth.

Which brings him back to his dilemma. Voldemort always calms him down, makes him feel better, and Sirius would like to reciprocate only he doesn't know how. He already established he doesn't have the talent to do it verbally, and it's too late to go buy him a nice gift, so what else is left?

Sometimes, Voldemort makes Sirius feel better with food; especially in the mornings, when Sirius is grumpy by default. If it's too early in the morning, he complains from the second he's awake and all the way up to when Voldemort shoves a plate of food at him.

Sadly, Sirius doesn't know how to cook, he's more likely to accidentally poison Voldemort than to make him feel better. Besides, Voldemort doesn't seem to enjoy food as much as Sirius does.

He likes tea.

Right. How hard can it be to make tea? Sirius and James made tea for each other a few times when Lily wasn't home, and it was…drinkable.

This might actually piss him off more, Sirius thinks, a few minutes later, after he managed to make a mess out of Voldemort's perfectly ordered kitchen.

Voldemort hates a mess. Sirius tries to shove several cups and pots back into the cupboards, but they don't fit.

He's growing angry himself, not understanding how is it possible for the *fucking things* to have had space before, yet now they refuse to go back in.

"What are you doing?"

Sirius curses, close to smashing some plates. "I'm making you tea," he barks. "But your furniture refuses to cooperate."

He glares at Voldemort, because he shouldn't be living like this, he should have a huge fucking kitchen, with proper space for storage; he should have a castle, on a thousand yards property with sprawling gardens and ponds, yet he insists on living as if he's a common man, not the dark lord-

Voldemort laughs, his eyes so warm they're almost brown, crinkling at the corners, and Sirius' frustration with the kitchen goes away.

"Go on, then. Make tea." Voldemort leans on a counter, all amused, no trace of anger left.

He only grows more amused when he sees how awful Sirius is at this entire tea thing. Eventually, he takes over, muttering something about 'spoiled, rich brat', but still in high spirits.

Sirius tries not to think too much about Voldemort having just tortured Avery, who might be an incompetent idiot, but whatever he fucked up couldn't have warranted torture. That's never warranted, except in extremely serious cases, like someone murdering someone's dog or something. Or in a duel. Certainly not at a meeting-

It doesn't matter.

Voldemort shiftings moods so fast doesn't matter, either, Sirius convinces himself. After all Sirius is also highly volatile, going from one emotion to another swiftly. Doesn't mean anything.

Sure, he never went from torturing someone to making tea and laughing in the next thirty minutes, but that's probably just because he doesn't know to make tea.

Or because he never actually tortured anyone.

"There you go." Voldemort hands him a cup.

Sirius never much liked tea, unless it had alcohol in it, but Voldemort always makes it perfect.

"I don't understand what you do to it to make it this good," Sirius says. He watched Voldemort at it for over a year, and he's not slipping any potion in the kettle, not using any spells, just regular tea leaves.

"It's made with love," Voldemort says, sarcastic and teasing, and now suddenly they're flirting.

Voldemort is lucky Sirius can keep up with the change of pace.

(-)

"You smell like wet dog," Voldemort informs him, as soon as Sirius enters.

It's not a reproach, mostly an observation. Voldemort sounds curious, watching Sirius closely.

He once remarked that he noticed Sirius turns into Padfoot when he's trying to hide from some 'inner turmoil', he called it.

Sirius brushed it off, even though he's not wrong. He used Padfoot *a lot* for those reasons, but he doesn't want Voldemort to associate Padfoot only with that.

"I was at the park with James and Harry," he says. "It was the first time without Lily, and Harry started crying at some point when he realised she wasn't around. So I transformed to distract him- he loves Padfoot."

James is jealous, to Sirius and Lily's amusement. But it's harder for James to become Prongs inside the house, and it would definitely raise some eyebrows if a stag accompanies a baby to

the park.

Plus, the antlers scare Harry, but he giggles when Padfoot licks his face, his tiny hands grabbing on to the fur.

It makes Sirius stupidly happy to have Harry like him; he didn't even know he worried about it, but he must have, because now he's relieved Harry likes him, smiles at him, reaches with his arms whenever Sirius is in his line of sight.

"Is he…normal?" Voldemort asks, following Sirius to the bathroom, not even commenting on the trail of clothes Sirius leaves behind him on his way.

"Huh? Who?"

"Harry."

Sirius gives him an odd look, climbing into the bathtub. "Of course he's normal," he says, a bit insulted. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"You always talk of him as if he's something special."

Well, he is special to Sirius. He's a wonderful baby. "He's lovely, yeah," he says, confused.

Is he worried I will start wanting children? Voldemort is weirdly curious about Harry, always drilling Sirius about him, when he never showed interest in any other babies, or kids or anything of the sort.

Sirius thinks to reassure him that no matter how cute Harry and Draco are, Sirius doesn't suddenly want to marry and get a baby of his own.

"I thought perhaps he has…something different about him," Voldemort says, somehow still interested in this, even if Sirius is *naked*, in the bathtub.

"Like what?"

"Some are born special. Magically so," he clarifies. "I was told all sort of odd things happened around me, since birth. It made the Matron think I was possessed. She talked about it often."

Sirius smiles. It is true, no matter how certain people deny it. Some people are just born different. Dumbledore can insist they are all equal, but they aren't.

He's not surprised Voldemort had magic since *birth.*

"Not the case," Sirius says. "No sign of magic yet."

It's far too soon; most kids don't manifest magic until two or three years old. Some are as old as ten when they first do it. Sirius heard wild stories of worried parents shoving their kids off windows, hoping the poor child would finally do accidental magic, under such duress.

“It was Draco that apparently floated his toy dragon to his crib. Or so Lucius boasts.”

Voldemort snorts. “I heard about it, thrice. Once from Lucius, once from Bella, now from you.”

“Black blood,” Bella said, proudly, when Lucius first told them.

“Or Malfoy blood,” Lucius drawled.

It caused a fight, but they stopped when Draco started crying, bothered by Bella’s shrieks.

Privately, Sirius agrees with her.

Voldemort finally gets the hint and stops taking about nonsense, taking off his clothes and joining Sirius in the bathtub.

(-)

“He makes her cook like she’s a house-elf?” Cygnus thunders, outraged, when Dora says she’s famished because her mother woke up too late to make breakfast.

Dora blinks. “What’s a house-elf?”

Cygnus’ jaw quivers dangerously, a match to the vein throbbing in his forehead.

“A servant,” Sirius answers. He doesn’t talk much at these weekly lunches. He only interferes when Cygnus won’t answer a question or when he senses dangerous territory up ahead. “They help with house chores.” They help with far more than that, but no need to overwhelm Dora with information.

“Ah. Ah, yes, I think I heard something about that.” She shrugs. “We only have grandma to come and help sometimes, but not often. She’s a muggle, you see,” she tells Cygnus. “Mama doesn’t know how to speak with muggles, I think she doesn’t really like them. And grandma doesn’t really know what to think of me, especially when I morph. I think it scares her a bit. Grandpa is better with it, he’s curious and brings me pictures to see if I can take the form of whoever is photographed.”

Cygnus is still mad, and he’s only about to get madder. “What about your other grandparents?” he demands through gritted teeth.

Dora frowns. “What other grandparents? I only have the two.”

“Your mother’s parents,” Cygnus hisses. “Or do you imagine she sprouted out of the earth, fully formed, daughter of no one?”

Dora's frown deepens. "She never mentioned them. I asked once, but she cried and then didn't get out of bed for like two days. I think they're dead or something. Daddy told me not to ask again, because it hurts Mama."

Cygnus does not like hearing that at all.

What did you expect? Sirius almost asks him. He doesn't, choosing to change the subject instead.

(-)

Voldemort seems pleased to find Sirius in his bed. He climbs behind him, emanating satisfaction.

Sirius was just wondering why he didn't go to his own house; why, when he came to the cabin and Voldemort wasn't there, Sirius stayed, snooped around his stuff, read a book he brought over from Grimmauld, long ago, and then went to bed. In fact, he can't remember when he last slept in his house.

Surely, this is *weird*. He's already spending too much time at the cabin, but now to stay there even when Voldemort isn't home?

He also realises many of his clothes are in Voldemort's dresser, and his toothbrush is in the bathroom-

I've turned into Marlene, he thinks. So far, Voldemort didn't freak out about it, the way Sirius did when he started noticing Marlene's stuff all over his house, and that she never left anymore.

"Had a productive night?" Sirius asks.

Voldemort hums into his neck, plastering himself all over Sirius' back.

Sirius almost always sleeps naked, or close to naked, because the cabin is hot.

That warmth seeking behaviour, so very snake like, makes Voldemort enjoy everything too hot. The temperature in the house, the bathwater. Sirius' body.

He's growing hard against Sirius' back, his lips leaving a trail of cool kisses on Sirius' neck and shoulder.

"Tired?"

"No," Sirius answers, moving a little, so that Voldemort's cock is now in contact with his arse.

Voldemort groans, a deep noise stifled in Sirius' shoulder; his fingers grab Sirius' hip, one of his legs pushes between Sirius'.

It's the first time he's showing interest in fucking Sirius, since Norway. Once they returned to Britain, they resumed their normal arrangement, Voldemort letting Sirius lead in bed.

Sirius prefers it that way. He liked it in Norway, but it's more comfortable for him to fuck Voldemort.

Except, of course, Voldemort doesn't come. He only does if Sirius sucks him off.

Or there was that time, in his luxuriant bathtub, when Sirius wanked them both. He came then, too.

Before, Sirius thought that getting fucked simply isn't that pleasurable, and that's why Voldemort wouldn't come.

But now he knows better; Sirius came hard in Norway, after all.

Still, while he personally prefers fucking Voldemort, now that he knows how it feels to get fucked, he isn't opposed to changing it up once in a while. It wasn't bad at all.

He wants Voldemort to enjoy sex as much as he did back then, so he tilts his head to give him better access, he allows his right leg to move further up the bed, knee bent.

Voldemort's hand roams all over him- his chest, his abdomen, his hip. That is especially nice. His cool touch, possessive, but almost…revering. It's fucking amazing, really.

And Sirius gets to be lazy, no effort required on his part.

Voldemort shows off with the lube- though it feels more oily than the lube Sirius conjures. It's warm, already, when Voldemort's slick fingers touch him; Sirius would roll his eyes if they weren't closed.

Who'd think a dark lord finds the time to tweak a lubrication spell, make sure it's the right temperature, the perfect texture?

What a nerd. Not that Sirius is complaining. He moves his leg more, shifts a little, until he's almost face down, but not quite. Voldemort's weight follows him, though it's not much weight, not nearly enough to be a problem.

It's his turn to groan, relaxing around Voldemort's fingers. He gets fully hard, too, and he moves a hand to readjust himself, trapped as his cock was between himself and the mattress.

He likes to come like this, with two of Voldemort's fingers inside him, but usually Voldemort sucks him off at the same time when he does that. Clearly, that's not the plan now.

As always, Voldemort takes his bloody time, until Sirius grows hotter than ever, cock twitching, leaving precome on the sheets.

How the fuck is he so patient?

By the time he replaces his fingers with his cock, Sirius is already half desperate for release.

He climbs almost entirely over Sirius, but Sirius is still not fully face down. Not the easiest position, but Voldemort is a fast learner, and he has no issues making space for himself.

Sirius' breath hitches; he's more aware than he was in Norway, when he was half drunk on dark magic and murder, the smell of blood and victory all around him, distracting him.

Nothing distracts him now from the slow press of Voldemort's cock. It's not exactly painful- he supposes it could be, but he has a high pain tolerance. It barely registers.

Briefly, it occurs to him that he's much rougher when he fucks Voldemort, and that probably *is* painful. He frowns into his pillow, but can't really focus on the thought, directs his concentration into relaxing, accepting the intrusion instead of trying to repel it, as his body instinctively chose.

Voldemort brushes aside the hair that had fallen over Sirius' face. He kisses Sirius' jaw.

Despite the lust and the slight struggle to accommodate the considerable width making its way inside him, Sirius smiles.

"Alright?" Voldemort sounds breathless when he half whispers the word into Sirius' ear.

It sends many thrills down his spine to hear him like that, nothing controlled about his tone.

"Mhm. You'd be the first to know if it wasn't alright," Sirius assures him. "I'm not known for suffering in silence."

"Good."

He wishes Voldemort would be as communicative with what he wants or feels when Sirius fucks him.

Patient as always, Voldemort stills once he's fully inside him. Sirius can feel Voldemort's heartbeat, faster and stronger, against his back, a dim echo of it inside the ring, too.

Sirius is grateful for the pause, uses it to breathe deeply, to adjust to Voldemort's cock.

His own is painfully hard by now, begging for some attention. It would be quite difficult to comfortably reach for it in this position, though.

He wonders how long Voldemort would keep still, if left to his own devices. Lucky for both of them, Sirius does not have the patience to find out, and he rolls his hips back, as much as he can, trapped as he is, with imitated space for manoeuvring.

Voldemort gets the hint, and he starts moving. Slowly, but there's nothing hesitant about it.

Sirius tries to breathe, but it's an adventure.

Gods, it feels like he's in my lungs.

And what a feeling that is.

The pleasure mounts with the next few thrusts, as the discomfort fades.

Sirius shifts a bit, enough to get some leverage, presses back, and on the next thrust, they met at an agonisingly delicious angle.

"Fuck," he hisses into his pillow, entire constellations appearing under his close eyelids. "Just like that," he says, to make sure Voldemort stays on track.

Apparently Voldemort doesn't mind getting directions, at least not during sex. And he's good at following them.

He noses at Sirius' jaw, sucks bruises onto his neck and shoulder, and it's bloody great, yet Sirius grows frustrated, eventually, seeking climax, but unable to crest, even if he's so close, right on the edge.

He brings his arms under him, pushes himself up, almost knocking Voldemort over. In fact, he should have been knocked over, but the fucker truly is snake-like. Sirius usually thinks of him as some venomous species, but he might as well be a constrictor, because he doesn't let go, moves with Sirius, until Sirius is on his knees, bent slightly over, one hand slamming into the headboard to support his weight, the other finally able to close around his cock.

He sighs in sweet relief.

Voldemort won't allow an inch of space between them, because he doesn't straighten up, prefers to bend himself over Sirius, chest to back, and he's lucky Sirius' arm on the headboard can take both their weights, because Voldemort uses one of his to curl around Sirius' waist, and the other to rest over Sirius' own, that's curled around his cock.

Why is this so hot? Looking down, seeing their fingers interlinked over Sirius' cock, moving in tandem, spikes up his arousal tenfold.

He shudders.

Either everything Voldemort does just happens to be amazing, either Sirius is so aroused anything would feel amazing- it doesn't matter; he is so close, single mindedly focused on his pleasure, and his mouth opens on its own accord; he hears himself telling Voldemort that if he stops, Sirius will *kill* him.

"A bold statement for a man in your position," Voldemort says into his ear.

"I always find the time to be a little shit," Sirius spits back, and Voldemort makes a noise, a strangled, incredulous laugh and that does it.

Sirius comes, vision whitening out, his ears ringing.

He lets go of the headboard, but they don't collapse to the mattress, because magic is holding them up. It makes Sirius moan, prolongs his orgasm.

Voldemort doesn't take much longer to finish; through a post-orgasmic bliss, Sirius notices how *measured* Voldemort still is, even as he chases his pleasure.

After they're done, both clean again, Sirius is ready to sleep, and he once more realises how perfect Voldemort is for him, because he doesn't nag Sirius with *talking* or whatever. He knows Sirius just wants to go to sleep, and that's great.

Sirius only has to put up with the knowledge that Voldemort will stare at him for quite some time, which would probably creep out some people, but not Sirius.

Many times, he briefly woke up to find Voldemort sitting on the edge of the bed, observing him; sometimes, he even found Voldemort standing, just *standing there*, besides the bed, looking down at Sirius.

Sirius mumbled stuff like *'you're one weird fellow'* or something to that effect, but he became used to it.

Either way, eventually, Voldemort will end up coiled around Sirius, when he's ready to sleep, too.

(-)

"Quick, tell me how I can repulse a woman!" he demands, barging into Lestrange's dining room.

"Just be yourself," Rodolphus says, unfazed, taking a bite off a lamb chop.

No one there is surprised with Sirius dropping in unannounced.

Rabastan, who'd have made a joke before, doesn't even look up from his plate. Poor man is going through it, still thinking of Evy.

"Come on Bella, tell me! I need to get back-"

"Who are they pushing on you?"

"Lidia."

"Hmm. Let me think."

"Think fast, will you!" Sirius checks his watch. He'd excused himself for a few minutes, but they'll start looking for him if he's missing for too long.

“Oh, I believe she’s the one that is terrified of harpies. She was almost eaten by one when she was small and her brother tricked her into a swamp. Tell her you love harpies and intend to travel to study them or something. That she’ll join you, like a good little wife.”

“I don’t know if it will work, I was already *horrible* to her all night, but she-”

“Tell her you’re fucking the dark lord. That should repulse her.”

Sirius jaw ticks. “Listen mate, I’m giving you a pass these days, but you’re *pushing it*,” he snarls at Rabastan.

“There’s an idea,” Bella hisses, staring daggers at Rabastan. “Sirius, why don’t you act mopey, and sad and *pathetic*, like my little brother here? Act like a spurred twelve-year-old girl. That will put her off, surely.”

Rabastan sneers at her. Rodolphus smacks him hard over the head. With his other hand, he points the knife he was holding at Rabastan. “Bare your teeth at her again and you’ll have no teeth soon enough,” he threatens.

“Gods, you’re all useless!” Sirius huffs, turning to leave.

“Ask Lucius, he should know. He thoroughly repulses me, at least,” Bella offers. “Though I guess it would take you years to learn how to be a boring, proper boot licker…”

Sirius ignores her, walking to the fireplace. Bella is daft. Women love Lucius, always did. He was massively popular with the ladies and could sweat talk the most aloof women in existence before he married Cissa. Hells, he made Cissa love him, and Cissa’s heart is half made of stone.

Even Andromeda liked him; she didn’t want to marry him mostly because she didn’t want to have Abraxas as a father-in-law-

Oh. *Oh! I can use Mum!*

Sirius returns to Grimmauld and their guests, and then he riles up his mother over dinner, until she blows off.

Finally, Lidia looks unsure, probably imagining how her life would be like, living with Walburga Black.

“That was smart,” Regulus observes, when the Rowles depart, a bit shocked after witnessing the screams between him and his mother.

She is still throwing a fit in their official dining room, with only Dobby around her, trying to calm her down.

“I’ve my moments,” Sirius says, leaning into the armchair, propping his feet on the coffee table.

His father stares at him, disapproving, from his portrait over the fireplace.

Sirius looks away.

(-)

“You’re using too much,” his grandfather says, at the end of their apparently mandatory weekly meetings at his house.

He called them ‘meetings’, because he’s…how he is, but it’s actually just tea, or whatever Tessuth deigns to serve them.

Indeed, his grandfather tries to keep Sirius up to date with Wizengamot stuff, things Sirius already hears in *real* meetings, Death Eater ones, but mostly he thinks his grandfather is lonely and likes to have tea with one of his grandkids, yet he’d never say it like that.

“Too much what?” Sirius asks, confused, because it’s a non sequitur. He peers at his grandfather, hopeful he isn’t going as batty as his elf.

“Dark magic.”

Sirius swallows, a prickle of unease gathering in the pit of his stomach.

“Now you’ve got something against the Arts?”

“No.” His grandfather is unimpressed with Sirius’ mocking tone. “Yet there must be a balance. Caution. You know better than this. Your father taught you better. Dark magic feeds on us- you mustn’t give it too much. It’s clinging to you these days.”

Sirius rolls his eyes.

“You lost weight,” his grandfather goes on.

“No, I didn’t!”

“You don’t eat as much as you used to.”

“You see me once or at most two times a week, what do you even know about my eating habits-“

“I know that whenever I sat you down and an elf offered you food, you took it.” He nods at the assortment of lunch/dinner Tessuth has arranged around the table. She’d reached the point she just doesn’t even try anymore to remember what time of the day it is or what she’s supposed to serve, but the food smells as good as ever. “Now you don’t.”

Sirius opens his mouth-

His grandfather lifts a hand, silencing him. “Be careful. I thought a reminder is in order, since the company you keep these days is unlikely to warn you off.”

Sirius narrows his eyes, he feels a wave of annoyance that must be obvious on his face.

His grandfather tilts his head to the side, observes Sirius. “You get angry at even perceived slights against him. You wear your…attachment on your face. You should guard it, so others won’t use it against you.”

“Him?” Sirius asks, jaw twitching. “Don’t you mean ‘it’?”

Voldemort casually said he found out Sirius’ grandfather calls him ‘it’. He didn’t even look bothered, more like amused.

‘He doesn’t,’ Sirius insisted. *‘We’ve talked about you, and he never called you ‘it’.’*

‘Of course he wouldn’t, not to your face. He doesn’t want to annoy you.’

‘He never cared about my feelings,’ Sirius assured him.

Voldemort smiled. *‘I have no doubt, but he’s interested in keeping you close, bringing you home, marrying you off. So he’ll make an effort not to anger you.’* His smile widened. *‘There are two men on this earth Arcturus Black takes care not to antagonise too much. You, and me. He never calls me ‘it’ to my face, either.’*

His grandfather shrugs, unashamed.

“I’m not using too much dark magic,” Sirius spits at him, angered, indeed, to look upon this man he loves, this man that raised Sirius, but that is so cold, so…close minded, he’d refer to a person as an ‘it’. “What lingers on me, what you feel, is this.” He reaches into his robe, and pulls out the ring, dangling over a chain.

He wants his grandfather to get mad; he wants to see shock on his face, outrage; he wants him to scold Sirius, tell him he’s a disappointment, a degenerate, a stain on their family.

Basically, he wants a fight.

His grandfather, at first, looks remarkably unsurprised, and Sirius has to imagine that he knew about the ring, that he has spies in Voldemort’s proximity.

Well, he has Cygnus, of course, but Sirius never wore the ring around Cygnus, either. So who told Cygnus? Not Bella, never Bella.

Lucius is too discrete, Rodolphus would rather cut his tongue than speak voluntarily with his father-in-law.

His grandfather’s almost amused expression turns, after just a few seconds. It morphs into shock, quickly hidden by a frown.

“Give it here.”

Sirius snorts. They'll have to pry it from his dead, cold hands.

"I only wish to have a closer look at it."

"Why? You know what it means," he says, hostile. It means Sirius is fucking Voldemort.

"I do." The frown deepens, and his gaze moves from the ring to Sirius' eyes. "I'm afraid you don't. It's more than a family ring."

Now it's Sirius' turn to be shocked. Surely his grandfather can't recognise a Horcrux at a *glance*.

"It is," Sirius says, vague. "And it is the dark magic lingering around me."

His grandfather looks back at the ring, frowning some more, but then he snaps himself out of it. "It isn't. Certainly, it's Dark, but that's not it. And you know it."

"Nothing to say about it?" Sirius needles him, still confrontational.

"I just did."

"Forget the fucking magic. You know what I mean."

His grandfather takes a sip of his tea. "I certainly know better than to chide you about where you spend your nights, Sirius, especially since you don't even have a wife. *Yet*. Whatever I have to say on the matter is irrelevant. Though I suggest you never provoke your mother in this manner, that you don't shove that ring in her face. You'll get the fight you want, then, and you'll regret it."

"I don't want to marry," Sirius keeps pushing, petulant, defiant. "Now I can openly tell you why."

His grandfather makes a face. "You will marry. One has nothing to do with the other. You will do your duty, provide us with an heir, and keep your…amusements separate from it. I'm sure even Voldemort understands you need to marry and procreate. He might be a savage from the muggle world, but even muggles understand the need for children and carrying on a family line."

"Don't call him a savage," Sirius says, hot anger travelling down his spine. He leans over the table, gets in his grandfather's face. "Don't insult him again, Grandfather, unless you want to get yourself disowned. You'll do well to remember *I* am the Head of House, not you."

The look he gets is the coldest he can ever remember. It would have made him shrink, even months before, but Sirius is far too angry to give a fuck anymore. It doesn't even feel wrong to threaten his grandfather.

"I respect you, and I let you order me around, I try to keep you satisfied, but you're crossing a line, a dangerous one. Do not test me on this," Sirius warns, and he gets a thrill of power, when his grandfather says nothing, because there is nothing he can say.

(-)

“It’s as if he aspires to suck the joy right out of you with talk of politics,” Voldemort says, when he comes home and finds Sirius drinking, half lying on the couch, half on the floor.

“Wasn’t politics today,” he mutters. He usually complains to Voldemort, after seeing his grandfather, that he was made to listen to boring Wizengamont stuff.

“Marriage?” Voldemort takes off his robe, hangs it on the wall beside the door before sitting beside Sirius.

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Voldemort runs his fingers through Sirius’ hair, and Sirius leans into him, because it’s comforting. He felt miserable as soon as he was out of his grandfather’s house.

That old man lived his entire life in service for his family, he is the reason Sirius’ father existed, he’s the reason Sirius exists, and to talk to him that way…

Yet he can’t truly regret it, either. He won’t be like the rest; he decided he’ll stand up for Voldemort, and he’s committed to it.

But he still feels…odd about it. Odd enough that he doesn’t even brag to Voldemort that he finally stood up to his grandfather, something that Voldemort kept *suggesting* lately.

“Why don’t you agree to-”

Sirius growls at him.

“Let me finish. Why don’t you agree to an an arrangement with a much younger girl? You would need to wait for a couple of years for her to become of age. That will get them to back off, won’t it?”

“Most of the time they make you swear an Unbreakable Vow when you agree to an engagement. Not always, but since Andromeda ran away, our reputation for respecting engagements has been tarnished. Any good family will demand a Vow from me.”

Voldemort tilts his head. “Then she’ll have an accident before the wedding.”

Sirius sometimes forgets Voldemort is…Voldemort.

“I’m not murdering some innocent girl,” he says, carefully. “Certainly not just so my family stops screaming at me.”

“You wouldn’t be the one to kill her,” Voldemort says, almost reassuringly, as if that would make it alright with Sirius.

Sirius opens his mouth, but he suddenly feels drained. Neither Voldemort nor Arcturus Black seem in possession of any kind of compassion lately.

“No, forget about it.” Sirius hopes he sounds firm. “I don’t- that’s -*no*. Anyway, I don’t think grandfather will bother me about it anytime soon,” he adds, darkly. “He knows about…us.”

“Oh.” Voldemort’s eyes flash with understanding, as if this piece of information suddenly explains Sirius’ darker than usual mood.

“It wasn’t - he didn’t have much to say,” Sirius goes on. He was *surprisingly* understanding, more so than Sirius would have dared to hope.

And you still talked to him like that, threaten to disown him. That was such a shit move, so low of Sirius to go there.

Stop it, he had it coming.

“Perhaps he’ll tell Mother.” Just to pay Sirius back. “And then she won’t pester me to marry, either, since she won’t *ever* speak to me again.”

Voldemort resumes playing with Sirius’ hair, pulls him even closer, until Sirius’ head rests on his shoulder.

“She caught me with this boy when I was fourteen.”

“What boy?”

“One of Evan’s cousins. We were kissing, and she caught us.” Sirius winces, just remembering. “And then she dragged me to Father.”

He winces again; his father’s small sneer of distaste- even if he defended Sirius, even if he never forbade Sirius from getting near another boy, nor did he say it would be wrong, Sirius does remember that sneer.

“She-” he trails off, unable to recount all the *shit* she yelled at him, all the insults.

But it seems he doesn’t need to. Voldemort sighs, and it sounds understanding, as if he can imagine exactly the type of things Walburga Black would have to say about that.

Yet then, he shocks Sirius. “She wasn’t as…radical when we were at Hogwarts. I remember she used to gossip with Alphard about his conquests.”

Sirius draws back, stares at Voldemort. He feels his mouth is hanging open, and he knows that’s not a good look, but he’s so shocked he can’t help it for some seconds.

“You must remember it wrong; you can’t imagine the things she’d say about Alphard-”

“My memory is excellent,” Voldemort assures him. “I would assume her vitriol came much later, when Alphard refused to marry Lucretia, and your father punished him for it, never

truly disowning him, but certainly everyone knew Alphard didn't have Orion's favour, that he was sometimes welcomed to Grimmauld, sometimes not."

He pulls Sirius' by the hair, and his grip is strong, but as always, never strong enough to actually hurt, until Sirius' head rests back on his shoulder.

"I remember rumours that Alphard's mother refused to talk to him, and his father wasn't very pleased, either."

Sirius snorts. "Yeah, you could say that."

His grandmother completely ignored Alphard, when his relationship with the family was good enough that his father would invite him for family events. His grandfather Pollux barely nodded at him.

It was just Sirius' father and Cygnus that talked to Alphard; well, and the kids. They all loved Uncle Alphard.

Sirius' mother, however, was *awful* to him.

"Alphard and Walburga always seemed very close at school. They were always together when we didn't have class, they ate together, they would go on walks around the grounds. I would assume she loved him and when he was pushed aside by the family, it probably hurt her to lose him. It was easier to blame him for it, rather than her parents or husband. And it was even easier to blame it on his preferences. Were I to throw a wild guess," he says, and he sounds amused, voice infused with sarcasm, "I would say she most likely loved you, too, and was afraid you'll meet his fate if you carried on behaving that way. Perhaps she was afraid to lose you."

Sirius stays silent for some moments, trying to process all of it.

"Are you *defending* my mother?" Sirius asks, smiling into a boney shoulder, his miserable mood dissipating. "Did I hear that right?"

Another sigh. "No," he denies, which only makes Sirius smile wider. "Now, if you stop moping around-"

Sirius opens his mouth to tell him he's not *moping*, but he's very thankful he didn't have the chance, because Voldemort continues speaking.

"-I'll take that ride you offered."

"Ride?"

"On your bike."

(-)

“You have to take your robe off; we’ll ride the muggle way for a portion of it,” Sirius says, excited.

“Alright.”

“But you’ll be cold when we’re flying, so-”

“Warming charms.”

“No, no, none of that. Warming charms protect against wind, and the wind is half the adventure,” Sirius insists, and he presents one of his leather jackets to Voldemort.

Voldemort steps back, *insulted*. “There is no way I will be wearing that.“

Five minutes later, brooding and with a tick in his jaw, Voldemort straddles the bike, climbing behind Sirius, leather jacket and all.

“Much better than a broom, you have to admit,” Sirius says, when they’re high above, heading for London.

“I’ve never been on a broom.”

Sirius turns around so fast, his neck protests. “What?”

“Shouldn’t you watch the…road?”

“Yeah, like I’m gonna hit another flying vehicle,” Sirius snorts. “What do you mean you never rode a broom? How is that even possible?”

“You could hit a bird,” Voldemort pushes at his shoulders, until Sirius turns back to face the night sky. “Or a small plane.”

Sirius snorts; they both know any small plane that cruises at a lower altitude would make a lot of noise. *He doesn’t want me looking at him.*

“I’m not letting this drop, you know. *How on Earth*- like, fine, you don’t look the sort to play Quidditch, but they have that one flying class in first year, mostly for muggleborns-”

“I was afraid,” Voldemort hisses at him, and his arms close around Sirius like vines, tightly, his head on Sirius’ shoulder, so Sirius can’t turn again.

So all Sirius can do is laugh.

“Of brooms?”

Ah, this is just precious.

Voldemort grasps him tightly, as in warning.

“You wouldn’t understand it. All I knew of physics, and I knew a lot for an eleven-year-old, suggested getting on a broom and taking to the skies would end in injury or death.”

“Really? They teach you that in muggle school? These physics?” Sirius heard about it before. “Is that why most muggleborns look afraid on their first flying class? But some aren’t-”

“Some are uneducated cretins, stupid children that don’t understand the risks- and no, they don’t teach you physics before eleven, but I taught myself out of boredom.”

Sirius is still laughing. “Gods, Snape looked green when we had that class- well, he’s *always* green, but greener than usual. He mostly hovered a few inches above ground. James and I took off and the flying instructor had to chase us. We mocked Snivellus for weeks.”

“And that is why I never even tried; I saw Abraxas and Alphard and other purebloods fly easily, mock the mudblood in Gryffindor that struggled with it, so I told the instructor I’m not interested in such childlike activities and persuaded her to let me be.”

“Alright, you didn’t want an audience for your first time,” Sirius allows. He can understand that.

He can’t remember his first time on a broom; he probably mounted a toy model when he was a toddler. After all, Sirius bought Harry a little broom that can only lift a few inches, and when Lily fell asleep on the couch, exhausted, he and James put Harry on the broom, even if he’s barely over six months. Saying goes, that if a baby can sit, they can definitely sit on a broom.

Draco is yet to try it- Lucius is worse than Lily, it’s as if he’s a muggleborn, too, paranoid Draco might somehow fall.

“Lucius, it’s only two inches,” Narcissa tried to convince him. *“And we have charmed carpets, for this purpouse. Even if he falls, he’ll be fine.”*

But Lucius keeps saying ‘next month’, even if he already bought Draco three baby brooms.

Sirius needs to somehow get rid of Lucius for a few hours and show Draco some fun. He’s starting to fear Lucius will soon charm Draco into a protective bubble and won’t allow him to leave his room, if he keeps on like this.

Narcissa said Draco chocked a little the other day on his apple sauce, and even if Draco recovered in a second, Lucius took an hour to recover just from witnessing it.

It is adorable, sure, but it’s also not a way a Black is raised. It’s certainly not the way Malfoys are raised, either.

“I am not my father,” Lucius hissed at him, when Sirius commented on it.

It’s odd- Lucius always tried to be like Abraxas, dedicated himself to pleasing his father, emulating him. Yet these days, Lucius’ entire personality is *“i am not my father”* when it comes to Draco.

Narcissa says that when Abraxas visits, Lucius won't even let Abraxas hold Draco, fighting with his father for the first time in his life.

"But why didn't you try on your own, later? Without an audience?"

"Why would I? I learned already wizards can Apparate, or use Porkeys. No need to risk falling off a thin piece of wood."

Sirius laughs again. "*Afraid of brooms.* That's cute. Are you still afraid? Maybe of heights, should I land?" he teases.

"I'll remind you I learned how to fly on my own. I'm not afraid of anything. I was a child."

"Let me guess- you were still afraid of brooms, you didn't trust them, so you went ahead and *defied* magic, invented an entire new way of flying, just so you avoid ever trying a silly broom?"

"Yes," he says, eventually. "I trust my magic more than a broom, obviously."

"But you're on a flying bike with me," Sirius says, with a grin.

Voldemort huffs. "My magic is with me," he remarks. "I am no longer eleven, I can control anything in my environment, fix whatever would go wrong."

"We'll see how you fair in London," Sirius says, speeding up, eager to reach his destination.

"What will happen in London?"

"The true appeal of riding a bike. This is nice and all, but it's hardly thrilling."

It's a nice ride- flying with Voldemort, on his bike, with the stars above them. They call to Sirius- they always do, but up in the sky, he feels it more. He ignores it, focuses on Voldemort's touch. Sometimes, Sirius reaches back, just to feel Voldemort's leather jacket- *Sirius'* leather jacket on Voldemort.

It's *so* nice.

And then Sirius lands on a quiet street on the outskirts of London.

"Get ready," he warns Voldemort, and he grabs the handlebars harder. "If you get scared, you can tell me," he mocks. "Here we go."

Sirius always rides like he's immortal, but slows down when he has a passenger, because he doesn't want to kill anyone. This time his passenger truly is immortal, so Sirius goes all out.

He cuts off cars at neck-breaking speed, swerves at the last seconds on narrow streets, handlebars touching the pavement, leaving sparks behind them. Muggles honk, swear after him, but they're all a blur as he zaps past them. He goes right through the centre of London, passing by Buckingham Palace. It's beautiful at night. He always liked it.

Eventually, police give chase, which is Sirius' favourite part. He toys with them for a while, laughing like a lunatic, until one of the officers almost crashes into a double decker, trying to catch up with Sirius- it would have surely killed the man, so Sirius *intervened* a bit, using magic for the first time in the race to redirect the officer's bike a few inches to the side.

Voldemort calls him 'soft', the first thing he said since they landed in London, but Sirius doesn't bother with an answer; instead, he decides the chase has gone on quite enough; he casts a camouflage charm and a muggle repelling one, before pulling the bike up so abruptly and at such a steep angle that Voldemort's fingers tighten on his waist for the first time.

"Who's soft now?" Sirius screams, hoping to be heard over police siren under them and the wind in their hair.

Though Voldemort has nerves of steel, he has to admit. Sirius never rode as crazy with a passenger, but the closest he's done it was with James and Marlene.

James was mostly fine, urging him on, but he definitely swore once or twice. Marlene screamed bloody murder, promising him a slow and painful death once they got off the bike.

"I'm gonna Apparate us," Sirius warns him. "Feels a bit funny with the speed, just so you know-"

"Oh, shut up."

Sirius grins and Apparates them above the cabin. It is a *loud* Apparation, and the bike's engine dies, but he quickly restarts it; he still can't do this part smoothly- in fact, he's only recently tried Apparition on his moving bike.

When they land and they get off the bike, Voldemort looks at Sirius with an indecipherable expression. His hair is windswept, messy for once, the leather jacket suits him perfectly and he looks entirely human.

He looks *handsome*; it's not something Sirius notices often. There are different qualities that attract him to Voldemort, that make him obsess over Voldemort, like his power, intellect and the way he treats Sirius; how he looks has never been a priority. Even when Sirius notices it, Voldemort is- he's ethereal, a unique visage that is past human standards of beauty.

Yet in that moment he does look handsome, more like Tom Riddle than ever. His cheeks have some colour to them, a faint pink hue. As powerful as he is, the wind affects even Lord Voldemort.

"I'll never cease to wonder how you survived to this age, with the way you like to risk your life on a daily basis."

Sirius laughs. "It's fine; like you said, we're magical. I can get myself out of impossible situations- also, you know how charmed the bike is, and how many protective runes it has."

The one from his father is the strongest, Sirius thinks. It stills shines brightly on the tank when the bike goes through very narrow spaces, almost touching walls or other cars.

Voldemort shakes his head, but he's fighting of a smile.

"You liked it," Sirius says, walking towards the cabin.

"You make me want to do things that do not bring me power. You make me want things, just *because*. How …curious."

(-)

His grandfather hadn't spoken a word when they met outside Gringotts; he gave Sirius a nod, and then they waited for Regulus, who luckily never arrives late anywhere.

The cart ride is dead silent, his grandfather staring ahead, ignoring Sirius thoroughly.

Regulus gives him questioning looks, but he can't ask what he wants to know, because their family jurist is with them, too.

Wilkes senses the tension, tries to make small talk, to no avail.

By the time they reach the Black vault, Sirius wouldn't mind it so much if the dragon would eat them all.

It's not just the stare of his grandfather burning the back of Sirius' head, but the idea he'll open his father's will in a moment.

Sirius shouldn't have left himself goaded into this.

"If you are going to act like the Head of House, then it is time we open Orion's will, make it official," his grandfather wrote, almost implying maybe his father left some surprises in his will or something.

Sometimes, when a Head of House with a young Heir dies, he names some other man in the family to act as Head, until the Heir reaches a certain age.

'Maybe Father picked a random age, like twenty-five or something,' Sirius said, anxious, the night before.

Clearly he can spend from the Vault, it *is* his, but maybe there are stipulations-

'I doubt it,' Voldemort reassured him.

Sirius didn't sleep at all.

Finally, the dragon is made to step aside, and the great iron gates open, almost blinding them.

It isn't even the gold- that's further back, mountains of it. Must be the jewellery that sparks so brightly when the goblins light the torches.

Sirius hadn't been to their vault in almost ten years.

The first time he was taken, his great grandfather Sirius carried him inside, after having slapped him outside the vault when he tried to *pet* the dragon.

His father did not allow Arcturus to raise a hand to Sirius, but he never dared reprimand his own grandfather.

"This will all be yours, someday," old Sirius said in his ear, *"But first, I must die, then Orion."*

"You're ancient so you'll die soon," Sirius informed him, cheek still stinging from the slap.

"Sirius!" his father admonished him, hidden by a stack of books.

But his great grandfather laughed, kissed Sirius' hair.

'"He's a spitfire, this one, Orion. He'll keep you busy when he hits puberty, I can tell."

Old Sirius bypassed his own son, named his grandson as Heir, instead.

Arcturus could have fought it upon the old man's death; a will is important, but laws of inheritance are equally important. It was his right to take the mantle as Head of House. Yet he didn't fight it, didn't contest the will.

The ring, the seat, the vault, their properties- all passed from old Sirius, directly to Orion Black.

"Are we ready?" the jurists asks.

No. Not at all.

Poor man is met with what Sirius assumes are three identical stares.

Mr. Wilkes sighs, in a manner that lets them know he's very accustomed with Black shenanigans, and then breaks the sigil, unfurling the scroll.

Hearing his father's voice almost brings Sirius to his knees.

All night, he wondered if he remembered his father's voice wrong, if maybe he forgot some inflections, or if he hadn't yet forgotten it, will the day come when he would?

Perhaps, in time, he'll forget the way his father smiled.

It made him drink, secluded in the torture barn, because it was quiet and dark there, and just in case he cried, he didn't want Voldemort to witness it.

He barely pays attention to what is said, focuses on his voice, treasuring it, trying to capture it, save it somewhere safe, inside his chest, in his soul.

He left Sirius everything, all their properties, all the gold, all their treasures; he named Arcturus as Sirius' legal custodian, to act as Head of House until Sirius comes of age, and *'not a second longer'*.

What was he thinking? Sirius can't fathom leaving all that wealth to a rebellious seventeen-year-old. Once again, he feels the impossible weight of such responsibility; the same he felt at sixteen, when his father gave him the ring.

He's twenty-one, but the weight doesn't feel lesser.

There are only two clauses- first, Sirius must take care of his mother, meet all her financial needs, 'within reason', until her death. Secondly, he must allow Regulus to pick a house to claim as his own, from all their properties.

The surprise comes when he speaks of his own personal vault; Sirius thought at least that one will go to Regulus, fully, or three quarters to Regulus and one to his mother.

But no: "divided equally between my sons."

Sirius would be so mad if he were Regulus.

His grandfather leaves as soon as the parchment rolls back into a scroll, without another word.

Their jurist leaves a second after, taking the will with him to register it at the Ministry.

"You can have all the gold from his personal vault." Sirius' voice comes out rough. He doesn't turn to look at his brother, pretends to be interested in a golden candlestick he grabs at random from a shelf.

"No," Regulus answer, though he takes his times, and his voice sounds wobbly. "We'll do as he said."

"I hardly need more gold-"

"This vault belongs to the family, Sirius. Father was in charge of it, and now you are, but you shouldn't spend too much from it, as father tried not to touch it, and every Head of House before him. You should try to add to our wealth, not take from it."

See, Father, he'd have made for a better Head.

"Try to only spend the gold dad left us from his personal vault. We'll both be wise to build on that, to make our own small fortunes to leave to our children, and keep the family vault intact. This is where our power comes from, you know? You shouldn't squander it."

Sirius snorts. "Even I wouldn't be able to squander all this."

He feels Regulus moving closer, feels his hand on Sirius' shoulder.

"It's not fair," Sirius says.

“It is. His personal gold is divided equally. I’m fine with that. It’s enough for me.”

It is enough- Sirius didn’t focus too much when the jurist said the amount, but he knows his father accumulated a lot of gold during his life; some, he worked for, other he inherited himself, from various relatives, including his mother’s side of the family.

If Uncle Alphard, who was the most irresponsible adult Sirius knew, managed to gather a substantial amount of gold, even with his ridiculous spending and not really interested in working or investments, then his father’s vault must be quite impressive in its own right.

“And mum- fuck! Mum! He left her nothing. How are we going to tell her?”

Regulus scoffs. “He left you in charge of her. You’ll take care of her. Gods know if you won’t, I will. She’s a woman, what need does she have for her own gold, when she has two sons and a father?”

Sirius turns around, angry, and glad to be angry, because it chases away the pain. He wants to yell at Regulus, tell him what utter shit just left his mouth, but then he sees his brother’s eyes are watery and shifty.

They don’t meet Sirius’, looking down. Sirius follows his gaze. In his right hand, Regulus holds the Black ring, palm up.

“You should wear it, now. It’s official-”

Sirius steps back. He shakes his head.

“I can’t wear it anymore,” Regulus insists. “You are the Head of House.”

“Leave it here,” Sirius says, voice rough. “I’ll take it. Eventually.”

“Sirius-”

“It’s too big,” he whispers, almost against his will. He remembers how it felt. It fit perfectly, but it weighed him down so much, as if he was lugging around a thousand pounds on his finger.

Regulus bites his lip. He looks up, surprised. “Really? I felt that, too. I thought it was just me,” he says, softly.

Sirius smiles at him, touched by Regulus’ unwavering faith in him, his belief Sirius is *capable*. He sounds bewildered to hear Sirius doesn’t feel worthy of stepping in his father’s shoes, as Regulus doesn’t feel worthy of it, either.

He hugs him. Regulus melts into it, for a few seconds, before he starts squirming, unused to such displays of affection.

“After the war is done.” Sirius uses this convenient excuse. He tells himself it would be irresponsible of him to wear it while the war is still on, when he could die in a ditch somewhere, disappear, and the Black ring would disappear with him.

You're already wearing something far more precious on your finger, his mind reminds him.

It would be terrible to lose the Black ring, but it can be reforged. Voldemort's ring, his *soul*, cannot.

Yet Sirius ignores all that, and he sticks to his excuse. "Until the war ends, the ring is safer here."

"Alright."

Regulus places it in a jewellery box, overflowing with diamonds.

And then he smirks. "Gods, I'm going to buy one of those empty lots in Hogsmeade and turn it into a Quidditch shop! I've had it all planned for years."

Sirius snorts. His brother and Quidditch. Just as bad as James.

They would have gotten along well. They used to, back when they were still small, when the hate and divide between sides wasn't as deep. They could talk about Quidditch for hours, when James visited Sirius.

Of course, his brother will still find some type of work in the Ministry, he's already doing all sorts of boring shit, following Lucius around, but he will never enjoy that as much as he enjoys anything Quidditch related.

"I want the house in Glasgow," Regulus announces.

"Far away from Mum, huh?"

"If I wanted that, I'll take the one in Greece. But yeah, it will be nice to get some space, on occasion."

Sirius shrugs. "Sure. You can have it. When you marry." He walks by, pats Regulus on the back, enjoying the way his face falls. "I'm sure that's why Father wanted you to have a house. For a family of your own. Otherwise, you can live with Mum. Or buy your own house, I suppose."

"Bloody git!" Regulus calls after him.

They spend another hour at the bank, turning their father's personal vault into Regulus'. Sirius moves his half of the gold in the vault he inherited from Alphard, situated deep inside the bank, but not even close to the old vaults on the very last floor, guarded by dragons.

It's a good sign when the goblins say the gold barely fits inside it.

(-)

“What’s that?” His mother glares at him from the armchair, cup of wine in her hand.

Sirius places the box at her feet. It’s wrapped in a deep blue paper, with a light blue bow. Her favourite colours.

“A gift.”

She scowls. “It’s not my birthday.”

Gods, why is she so difficult?

Sirius bites his tongue, so he won’t say something scathing.

She sighs, put upon, and taps her wand to the box. Her face changes from shock to tenderness, back to a scowl.

“You lost your mind.”

“If you don’t want him, I’ll throw him in a forest somewhere-”

“Oh, shut up!” she snaps. But then she places her wand and her cup on an end-table, bends to reach inside the box and when the puppy is in her arms, she smiles.

It’s adorable. A husky. Her favourite breed. When they visited Siberia, she spent half the days with Sirius, in freezing temperatures, playing with the dogs of their hosts.

It’s a tiny thing, a ball of white fluff, with the bluest eyes. Sirius bought a rather large sapphire and hung it on its collar.

“I don’t want nor need a dog,” she says, but she’s already petting it. The little thing is excited, his tiny tail wagging, busy sniffing her lap.

She needs a dog. She’s lonely, and bitter, and hateful. No one likes her.

She needs a dog that will lover her unconditionally, offer her company, that will be always happy to be around her, and won’t fight back, won’t spit insults at her, and won’t mind it too much when she spits insults at him.

“What brought this on?” She peers up at him, eyebrow raised.

He shrugs, goes closer and scratches the puppy’s head behind his ears. He’s rewarded with a joyful noise.

“Let me guess. Well, I don’t need to guess, Regulus told me where he was going this morning. You opened Orion’s will, and he didn’t leave me anything.”

Sirius makes a non-committal sound.

She scoffs. “You both got gold and houses and treasures, and then you thought to buy me a *dog*.”

It does sound silly, when put that way. She has this way of making him feel bad, stupid, inconsiderate. It was always like that- Sirius would try to show kindness, affection, but he'd do it wrong, and she'd make him feel terrible for it. Eventually, he stopped trying.

"Like father, like son," she says, yet-

Sirius dares to look at her, taking his eyes off the puppy. She didn't sound venomous.

She doesn't look mad. She's smiling.

"He left me a dog, too," she says. "A dog of a son."

Their eyes meet.

"And a normal one, I suppose," she adds.

"You shouldn't call Regulus a dog," Sirius says, and she only smiles wider, rolling her eyes.

"Dobby!"

"Yes, Mistress. Oh!" His silly face shifts with curiosity when he sees the puppy.

"Go to the menagerie. We have a dog, so get him everything he needs."

"You'll have to walk him," Sirius says, when Dobby disappears.

He hopes this would get her out of the house. She almost never leaves Grimmauld.

"It's beneath me. I'll have Dobby take him to the country manor, when he's bigger. What's his name?"

"He's yours, so whatever you want."

They both look at the puppy, who is still trying to sniff around his mother and the couch.

She makes a long suffering sigh. "Snuffles. Might as well. I got used to all those dogs named Snuffles."

Sirius grins at her.

"Where is Regulus?"

"Off buying something. A shop or whatever."

"What did he get, then?"

"Half of dad's vault. Nothing from the Black one-though I'll have to give him a house, eventually."

She nods, seemingly accepting of this outcome.

Sirius pulls a key out of his robe pocket. “He lectured me on not spending money from the Black Vault,” he says, and he places the key on the table. “I guess he’s not wrong. So, this is a key to my vault. For when you need it. Whenever you need it. For whatever you need,” he stumbles.

Snuffles makes a brave escape, jumping from her lap onto the couch. He’s so small, he falls on his side, but he isn’t bothered about it.

“Didn’t Orion warn you I am a terrible, wasteful spender? That I burned a hole through his gold?”

“No,” Sirius lies. “He never mentioned it.”

His father did mention it, here and there. Sirius remembers she was always buying things, left and right, every day. Almost as if to spite her husband.

His father got frustrated sometimes, but he never told her to stop, he never limited her access to his vault, even if Sirius remembers Cygnus suggesting it.

He can’t imagine her spending gold on anything these days. Sirius was given a parchment from Gringotts, with all the gold that was taken from his dad’s vault, since he fell ill, but no one came to claim it, so his mum was still allowed inside, with her old key.

Shockingly meagre amounts of gold were taken. His mother probably just took enough for food. She doesn’t go anywhere, she doesn’t visit people, she doesn’t buy jewellery as she used to.

“You should go with Cissa to Paris, buy some robes,” he suggests.

“I’m in mourning,” she snaps.

Sirius bites his lip. “It’s been years,” he says, softly. She doesn’t need to wear all black anymore. It makes her look older; it makes her look even thinner than she is, frailer.

“I’ll be in mourning all my life,” she says, defiant, and gods know what’s going through her head.

“You hated him; everyone knows it. Why pretend otherwise?” he doesn’t even sound judgemental. He’s genuinely curious.

“I hated my husband,” she says. “But I am mourning my cousin.”

Sirius opens his mouth, but he can’t think of what to say to that.

In fact, he figures this visit was a success. He was dreading it, and her reaction to the will, but it seems only he is bothered by the fact she wasn’t left with anything.

He went to Bella to complain about it, as soon as he left Gringotts, because she was the only person he could think of that would understand.

"They try to keep us away from gold. Women inherit as a last resort, you know this, no need to act surprised. They know very well that if we'd have our own gold, we'd leave, far, far away and never look back. The fuckers!"

She always did go on about it, but Sirius didn't care that much in the past. He let her vent, agreed, and ignored it.

He cares now. It's…it doesn't sit right with him.

It's his *mother*, for fuck's sake.

"She didn't work for it, though," Rabastan says. "She got to stay home, while Orion did all the-"

"If you think raising this one," Rodolphus nods to Sirius, "wasn't hard work, then you're stupid." He pats Bella's leg. "You're in my will. You'll get half; if Rabastan doesn't pull his shit together, then you'll get everything."

"I see him in you often, you know," his mother says, taking Snuffles in her lap again.

Sirius loves being compared to his father, but from her it always sounded like an insult.

"I know," he says.

"It's not the worst thing," she goes on. "He was a…generous man. Thoughtful and considerate, at least when he was younger."

"Doesn't seem like it," Sirius mutters.

"He didn't leave me any gold, so he'd force *you* to care for me, and he'd force me to depend on you. He was worried, before he died, that without him around, we'd never speak to each other again."

Sirius swallows. He was right to worry. What his father feared, almost came to pass.

Of course, his father wouldn't have imagined Sirius would refuse to touch his will or their vaults for so long.

"As if he didn't know how stubborn we are," Sirius says, sitting on the armchair's armrest. "We might as well have stopped talking, anyway. Maybe I would have taken all the gold and refused to even glance at you. And then what would you have done? Starved to death?"

She rolls her eyes, transfers the puppy in his lap. "I have Father; Orion knew if the worst came to pass between us, I could always depend on Father. Or on Cygnus, too- cruel cretin that he is, he wouldn't abandon me cold and hungry. And Alphard-" her voice clouds with hate. "Orion had no way of knowing Alphard would follow him so soon. But I'm sure he knew you wouldn't starve me, to begin with. That's why he set it up that way. He knew you are generous and thoughtful, too. That you would be the son that feels bad I got nothing, and bring me a present. You don't see Regulus around, trying to console me. I'm sure he doesn't see anything wrong with your father's will. To be sure, nothing is wrong." She looks up to

him, with a sad, sad smile. “But you have a soft heart, you always did. When you’re not busy acting like a demon, that is.”

“You know, Mum, with all your tutors and everything, no one taught you how to properly compliment someone, did they? You’re horrible at it.”

“They tried,” she says, nonchalant. “It didn’t stick.”

(-)

Ever since Voldemort tortured Avery that night, Sirius makes sure to never miss a meeting.

Sometimes Voldemort gets angry, and, to be fair, Avery especially gives him reasons, what with his incompetence, but he doesn’t torture anyone when Sirius is there, even if sometimes his fingers twitch on the table.

Everyone in the inner circle breathes easier when they see Sirius joining them. They all know. Not just that he’s fucking Voldemort, but that he’s the reason for the no torture unspoken rule.

Rodolphus, though he’s not a fan of *any* of this, once hunts Sirius down, waits outside a pub until Sirius is done with his beer, saying goodbye to Peter.

“We have some bad news for our lord,” he says, cornering Sirius in some alley. “Best if he’s…in a good mood tomorrow morning, when we tell him, unless you want Yaxley dead.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “I don’t give a damn about Yaxley,” he says, nonchalant, but stupid Rodolphus knows Sirius sort of does give a damn, since he’s bothering with all the meetings, some of them held at ungodly hours in the morning, when he’d much rather sleep.

Possibly this is a new form of torture for the Death Eaters- holding meetings at eight in the morning. Who even is awake at that hour, voluntarily? None of the high ranking Death Eaters have jobs, at least not the type with a sadistic schedule, so Sirius can never understand why they all look put together, awake and aware, when Sirius struggles not to fall asleep as they drone on about evil plans or whatever. He rarely pays attention.

“How do you suggest I keep him in a good mood?” Sirius teases, happy to see Rodolphus so annoyed.

Rodolphus sneers at him. “Bake him a cookie,” he mocks.

“Actually, he’s the one that cooks for me-“

Rodolphus swears, covers his ears. “Stop! I don’t want to hear that! Fucking Blacks,” he growls, as he hurries away.

Lucius is even worse than Rodolphus. He doesn't ask Sirius to 'keep Voldemort in a good mood' when he has bad news to break to him. No. If Lucius has bad news, if he failed at something, he asks Sirius to deliver the news to Voldemort, in his stead.

Sirius should start charging them- he would, if he were poor, and he'd make a fortune.

Alas, apparently he's collecting 'favours', Lucius says.

By now, Avery owes Sirius his soul, with how many times Sirius saved him from who knows what punishments.

(-)

"Where did you get these, and what are you doing with them?" Sirius asks, when he gets up one morning to see Voldemort, once again, doing something with a bunch of rare gems.

"I stole them," Voldemort says, distracted, casting a charm on a couple of silver chains.

For some unknown reason, Sirius loves it that he's such a shameless thief.

"Don't touch it," he adds, when Sirius tries to pick up what looks to be a black diamond. "Your magic will interfere."

"With what- what are you doing? You've been working on this for two days."

"A necklace, isn't it obvious?"

It sort of is, it's coming together to look like one, but that doesn't explain its purpose.

"It's for Bella."

"Oh."

He doesn't know why this shocks him; it shouldn't. Voldemort cares for Bella, in his own detached, cool way. It's no secret.

Sirius has now started hearing rumours they are *both* having an affair with Voldemort.

It's starting to annoy Rodolphus. *"Why am I always left out of these rumours?"*

"Everyone knows you wouldn't partake in such debauchery," Bella consoles him.

"Neither would you!"

"Yes, but I'm the 'bad, rebellious woman', so they'll believe anything they hear of me, darling."

"Plus, it's getting crowded," Sirius points out. "If they add you to the party, we'd be what? A quadruple? Or is that a straight up orgy?"

"I wouldn't know, you're the expert in orgies," Rodolphus drawls.

"Oh, stop pretending you were some saint before we married," Bella pokes him in his side.

"It is an orgy," Rabastan settles it. "More than three, it's an orgy."

Voldemort is fond of her, and everyone in their confidence seems to know it.

Still, to make her a necklace for her birthday…

"I'm weaving some charms into each gem," Voldemort explains, and then goes into extremely nerdy stuff territory, about how exactly he's accomplishing that and to what end. "What are you getting her?"

"A bracelet. A *real* one." Sirius smirks, but he knows he's being outclassed. Whatever he buys, will not be as good as this weird necklace Voldemort is putting together for her with magic. No doubt it will have many purposes and charms and curses.

"She said Regulus will be there," Voldemort puts another gem on the string. Sirius isn't sure how this is accomplished, since there's no hole for the chain to go through, no clasp.

"Of course he will."

"I seem to remember you were insistent that I wouldn't be around him."

Sirius waves it away. That was ages ago, when Sirius didn't really know Voldemort. "How long are you going to work on that? Because I'm hungry. If you're busy, I'll drop by James'-"

Voldemort stands before Sirius even finishes the sentence, heading for the kitchen, ordering Sirius to sit on the couch and not touch anything.

Sirius sits, pleased. He loves that Voldemort cares for Bella, he *does*, but still. He loves it more that his breakfast is more important than her birthday gift.

He's not even hungry, but that's besides the point.

(-)

Regulus is more excited than Bella at the birthday dinner. They're all still tired, they partied hard the past night, with around one hundred people that have come from far and wide to celebrate her, but Bella also wanted a dinner with 'just the most important men in my life', so she's hosting them in Lestrange Manor.

The most important men in her life are all at the table. And Druella.

The Malfoys were invited, of course, but Sirius has an inkling that Lucius will go to great lengths to keep Draco out of Voldemort's sight, same for his wife, so they came up with an excuse that Draco came down with some imaginary ailment.

Druella might as well not count, sitting silently beside her husband. She does acknowledge Voldemort, which shocks Sirius. He knows she's on some heavy potions, but still- so many men cry only when hearing his name, in fact the majority of their country doesn't even dare uttering that name, and yet his slip of an aunt only smiles when Voldemort takes her hand and bends to kiss it.

"You are well, I hope?" he says and Druella nods.

"Well enough, thank you. And you? Keeping busy I hear."

"As always," he responds, pleasantly.

She, too, went to school with Voldemort, like the rest of his fucking family.

After that, she falls silent, only whispering a word or two to Cygnus.

Regulus stares at Voldemort, avidly and timidly all at once, sounding more pompous than ever when he finds an opportunity to talk. Rodolphus and Cygnus, giving the occasion, both promised not to have a go at the other, just this once.

Rabastan never speaks much when Voldemort is around.

As aways, it's Sirius and Bella that do most of the talking, with occasional interruptions from Voldemort, seated at the head of the table.

Bella is already wearing the necklace, Voldemort must have given it to her in private, and it annoys Sirius. It's stupid, but he's jealous.

He knows himself enough to admit he's always been a very jealous individual. And with Voldemort, it's tenfold.

Once, he had a vague dream about Voldemort being interested in some faceless stranger, and Sirius woke up so mad, he didn't talk to Voldemort for two entire days.

Poor man was at a loss, unaware of the horrible betrayal he'd committed in Sirius' dream. And Sirius was well aware how *stupid* it all was, so he didn't tell him, just made them both unhappy for a couple of days, until his anger passed.

His grandfather was on to something with the dark magic warnings; Sirius was always a tad irrational and prone to anger, but these days his anger is stronger than ever, and so close to the surface.

Probably that's why he's so irrationally annoyed with Cygnus and Regulus being there.

It's not like he publicly displays any affection for Voldemort when it's just the Lestranges around, but it's different, because he's more relaxed when it's just them.

Now, he must take great care not to sip from Voldemort's glass, or move his chair closer to him, or anything like that. More so because of Regulus. Cygnus *knows*, Sirius is sure of it. If his grandfather found out, Cygnus definitely knows. Probably he was the one to tell him.

Sirius doesn't care what he thinks, in any case. But his brother…Regulus will be disgusted.

His annoyance mounts, turns to anger, by the time the dessert arrives, some fancy, over the top cake that no one will eat.

Bella will take exactly three bites, and then she'll push the plate away, and that will be that, as it's the case every time.

Wasting food, Sirius seethes, as if he cares about shit like that. But his temper is such that now he's searching for any excuse to rationalise his mood.

It must be obvious, because both Voldemort and Bella glance at him several times; Voldemort with a small smirk, because he's just as demented as Sirius, and apparently he likes it when Sirius gets mad and causes some drama; Bella with a warning in her eyes.

Regulus should know better, Sirius thinks, angrier and angrier. Usually, Regulus would have been the first to pick up on Sirius' mood, because through their childhood, it meant trouble for him.

But he's so fascinated with Voldemort, so *disgustingly* eager to appear smart and grown up, that he misses it.

So it's his fault, truly.

"Past your bedtime, brother," Sirius drawls, when the mostly untouched cake disappears from the table and Bella asks them if they want coffee or tea. "Hurry home to Mother, won't you? Before she worries too much."

"Here he goes," Druella says, dreamily, from the other end of the table. "Always so mean to his brother."

Regulus fixes him with a venomous look.

"Don't pout," Sirius says, even if Regulus isn't pouting. "I'm sure you'll miss our lord, but you can just go to your bedroom and stare at all the pictures of him you glued to the wall above your bed."

He never thought someone with their complexion could go so red. If Sirius wasn't angry, he'd worry Regulus is having some sort of medical emergency, the way he goes almost purple with embarrassment.

Rabastan howls in laugher further up the table. Even Rodolphus tries to hide a smirk.

Bella just shakes her head at Sirius.

Voldemort blinks; he looks confused. “What?”

Regulus *flees* from the table; Sirius will have to take him aside one of these days, exchange some words about what being a Black means; they can’t blush in public, they can’t flee like cowards. He thought Regulus knew all this, that their father impressed this lesson upon him long ago, that he erased Regulus’ natural shyness, but it seems it’s still there.

Their father might be dead, unable to remind him of all this, but Sirius is still alive so it falls to him.

Druella sighs. “I told you he’s mean,” she tells Cygnus.

“We all know, darling,” Cygnus assures her.

“You are such a little shit,” Bella hisses.

“Oh, come on, that was hilarious.” Rabastan is still laughing.

“He has pictures of me on the wall?” Voldemort enquires, taken aback.

Bella sighs, uncannily like her mother. “A veritable shrine,” she mutters.

“Yes, with articles, too,” Sirius adds. “He even *framed* some. And that Dark Mark he drew, remember that one?”

Bella nods.

“That boy,” Cygnus shakes his head in disapproval.

(-)

“Did Walburga see all that? Regulus’ room, I mean. Did Orion?” Voldemort asks, brewing a cup of tea.

“He started with it after Father fell ill; he wouldn’t have dared otherwise. But yeah, Mum saw it.”

Voldemort has his back to Sirius, but he’s emanating glee. Sirius is sure he’s smiling.

It always amuses him when Voldemort takes joy in petty shit like that, small revenges against his old schoolmates. Sirius is just as petty, after all.

Yet now that he’s finally alone with Voldemort, he calmed down, and he’s starting to feel a tad guilty over his outburst at dinner.

“I never knew which room she hates most, Regulus’ or mine.”

“What’s in yours?” Voldemort looks over his shoulder, eyebrow raised.

“Almost naked muggle girls. Big posters. And bikes.”

“How original,” Voldemort says, before he turns his attention back to the tea.

“Unlike Reggie, I started putting them up while Dad was still alright. He had a laugh about it when Mum dragged him into my room to show him.”

“See?” His mother screeches, cheeks red as she points at one of the girls. “See what he did? Look at them!”

Sirius stands by his desk, but he isn’t too worried. He doesn’t think his father will make a big deal out of it. At most, he’ll order Sirius to take them down, and then he’ll probably punish Sirius to stay in his room for a handful of days when he discovers Sirius used a permanent sticking charm and it will take some work on Kreacher’s part to take them down. Sirius is gleeful when he imagines how hard the elf will have to labour to get rid of them.

His father tilts his head, takes in one of the posters, a girl clad only in some pink, almost see through knickers and a lace bra.

He frowns. “It’s so odd that they don’t move.” He looks at Sirius. “Don’t you find it… disquieting?”

His mother makes an indignant sound.

Sirius shrugs. “I’d rather a witch, but I am yet to find a magazine with naked witches.”

His father opens his mouth, then he gives his mother a glance and thinks better of whatever he meant to say.

“There are naked women on his walls, Orion! He’s fourteen! Regulus saw them! He’s exposing that innocent boy to this filth-“

“At least he took off some of the Gryffindor banners.” His father smiles at her. “I remember you caused a scene about those, a couple of years ago. I told you he’ll take them down eventually, and he did. He’ll take these down, too, when he grows bored.”

His mother left, slammed the door behind her, calling both of them perverts.

His father told him where he could find magazines with naked witches. A rarity- not many witches need to resort to posing nude in their world.

“Are the women *on* the bikes?” Voldemort’s voice pulls Sirius back to the present.

“Some.” Sirius grins, making Voldemort snort.

He turns, teacups steaming, sets them on the table before he sits. As always he does all this the muggle way, and it makes Sirius so fond of him.

As fond as when he bends over and takes Sirius' fags from his robe pocket.

"Do other young Death Eaters keep pictures of me? Or is it just a Black thing?"

Sirius throws an unlit fag at his face. It disappears before it can hit its mark.

"It's different!" Sirius scowls.

He has Tom Riddle's picture, not the dark lord's. And he didn't fucking frame it on his wall, along with articles of mass destruction caused by him and his minions-

You really should stop calling Death Eater minions, since you're one of them.

"And I'm certain Regulus isn't the only nutter. For sure Crouch would do it, if he lived alone and didn't risk his father stumbling over such damning proof that his son went insane. Snape probably wanks to them," Sirius spits, not believing it, but saying it regardless. Though it is quite possible Snape does wank at thoughts of being a Death Eater and getting to be someone of relevance, as opposed to slime ball, no one, poor half-blood. "That's one creepy lad. But most likely Snape still wanks to a picture of Lily, the bastard."

If Sirius was James, he wouldn't stand the thought of it. Of that greasy looser getting off to a memory or a picture of his wife. Sirius would…no, he would never be alright with that.

Voldemort tilts his head, a small frown forming between his brows. "Potter's Lily?"

"Yeah. He's obsessed with her, stalked her around for *years*. Even before Hogwarts, from my understanding. It didn't endear him to his mates, that he was salivating over a mudbl-muggleborn."

"Severus is smart-"

"Please," Sirius spits. Though yeah, the little basement dweller isn't dumb or anything, but Sirius will never admit it out loud.

Voldemort's frown fades into a smirk. "He is smart. Unpleasant, but smart. And Potter must be smart, too."

"You bet he is!"

"She must be something …special, to have their attention."

You poor bastard. Sirius stops himself from saying it, but it endears Voldemort to him more. "She's hot," Sirius explains it to him. "Not to take away from her wit or anything, but that's not why she was popular. She was popular because teenage boys found her hot."

Voldemort has a doubtful expression. "With that atrocious hair? In my time, gingers were not considered attractive."

He laughs. “No, it’s- look, it’s not the *hair*.” He takes a sip of tea- perfectly brewed, as always- and he laughs some more.

It really is so- *something*, that Voldemort doesn’t get how a normal teenaged boy mind works when it comes to girls.

“Do you find her attractive?”

Sirius makes a face, disgusted. “No. She’s James’. She’s sexless to me.”

“Before she entered a relationship with him-“

Sirius waves it away. “He claimed her waaaay before that. I think in our third year or something. Once a mate declares his interest for a girl, that’s it. You don’t even consider her anymore. Besides, she was so snotty I was mostly annoyed with her when we were kids. I had a crush on Evy. She was older, her skirt was shorter than the rulebook demands, and she was wild.”

“Rabastan’s Evelyn?”

“Yes. Though technically she’s Paul’s Evy, I suppose.”

“Even I know that they’re still seeing each other. Is Rabastan aware you slept with her?” Voldemort looks amused and interested and he can be such a gossip sometimes. No wonder he gets along with Bella and Lucius.

Pity Cissa despises him, otherwise she’d love gossiping with him, too.

“Oh, yeah. Everyone knows. There was this…incident in my fifth year. In a broom closet. Minnie spotted us and she made such a scandal the entire school found out by morning. And then by the next week, all the parents found out, too. But forget that- how do *you* know Rabastan and Evy are still fucking?”

“He asked me to brand Paul,” Voldemort explains, which only spells trouble.

“Oh, that can’t be good.”

What, will Rabastan ask Voldemort to send Paul on faraway missions or something?

“Rodolphus wasn’t happy about it, Bella confided in me. Apparently there were dramatics involved.” He sighs. “I always miss these things and have to hear about them second-hand. No one dares to cause a scandal around me, but you and Bella make stories about family dinners sound entertaining.”

Sirius huffs. “Gave you a taste tonight,” he mutters, and now the guilt is really creeping up on him.

Poor Regulus.

“Yes, you did.” Voldemort smiles at him, lights a fag. “But I’m sure if I wasn’t there, it would have gotten more entertaining. Cygnus would surely have had more to say.”

Sirius nods. “I always end up fighting with Cygnus when we have family dinners. Or with Mum. It’s usually one or the other. Or both.”

Voldemort falls thoughtful, wistful even. Sirius thinks Voldemort would like to see all that unfold, to be part of such common occurrences in Sirius’ life.

And Sirius wants it, too. He wants it so *badly*, he can taste it.

For a second, he has a fantasy about coming with Voldemort to a full family dinner, grandparents and in-laws and everything.

(-)

When Sirius corners Regulus in his room, he doesn’t remind him Blacks don’t run away with shyness, like he meant to.

“I’m sorry,” he says, instead, taking advantage Regulus is at his desk, his back to Sirius.

The pictures and articles are gone from the wall.

“It was shitty of me to say that with him there, alright? But he doesn’t mind it, or anything. He doesn’t think less of you because of it.”

“I’m your brother,” Regulus says. Sirius can hear the anger in his voice. “Would be nice if you remembered that, here and there. If you’d pass the chance to humiliate me in public. Apparently, it’s no longer fun for you to do it in private.” A small pause, and then, quieter: ”You’d never do that to Potter.”

“You think I never told Lily how much he pined for her, stealing scarfs she left behind and-“

“She’s just a mudblood, who cares about her?” Regulus says, and it’s so hard to deal with him sometimes.

Just as Sirius pities him, feels bad about how he treats him, Regulus says shit like that.

It’s a bit like Snape. *Rarely*, Sirius would question if he’s pushing it with Snape, taking it too far, but then the moron would do something cruel to others, and whatever slim trace of doubt Sirius held would dissolve, and he was back to being justified with his own cruelty.

“Not like it was a surprise for her, I imagine. The entire school knew Potter was sweet on her. Besides, Potter doesn’t know what shame means. You can’t embarrass him.”

Blacks don't know what shame is, he almost says. *Blacks aren't ashamed.* His father told them that.

"I said I'm sorry, alright?"

Regulus deflates, his shoulders lowering a bit. He knows Sirius doesn't go around apologising to people.

"Remember when Bella kept messing with you, and then when you got upset, she'd just say 'sorry'? You said it wasn't fair, that she knows you can't stay mad at her for long, and she'll just take advantage of that. That's how I feel. Not that you care-"

"I care. You know I care, don't be an idiot."

"You didn't care at Hogwarts, in your last year-"

"Morgana's tits, grow up! Hogwarts, really? We're not in school anymore, we're not kids. Knock it off. I *am* sorry, I won't humiliate you in public again, and that's that. Let it go."

He knows that's a bad apology, but he doesn't have much experience with them.

Besides, it was just teasing him over some posters. It's not like he killed Regulus' girlfriend.

Not that Bella ever apologised for it.

"Alright." Regulus' shoulders relax entirely. "Fine. But I'm not going to stand before our lord anytime soon!"

"You'll get over it. He truly didn't mind it; he said I was a knob for saying it, too."

Voldemort didn't, he likes it when Sirius bullies people or embarrasses them. But there's no reason for Regulus to know it.

"Truly?"

"Yes."

Regulus turns around. "He really is a wise man, isn't he? And the only one to make you see what a horror you are."

"Yeah, yeah." Sirius waves it away, smiles at Regulus.

Regulus smiles back, tentatively.

When he gets out of the bedroom, his mother ambushes him in the hallway. "I don't know what you did, but he took those horrid clippings off!"

"I bullied him into it," Sirius admits, just because it's second nature to give her occasions to scream at him.

She screamed for *any* little reason, but it was always so much worse when Sirius picked on her little darling Regulus.

Yet this time she smirks. “Good. Now bully him into finding a wife. Arcturus will lay off you for a time if at least Regulus marries. I’ll stop mentioning it, too, and let you whore around for a little longer.”

Sirius wonders what she’ll think, if she ever goes to his bedroom, and she finds out he took the naked ladies off his walls, too. He kept one of the bikes, the same model he rides, but he took down the women and the remaining Gryffindor banners. He’s no longer a teenager.

It was silly for Regulus to have that in his room, at his age, and it was equally silly for Sirius to have his posters, even if that’s not even his bedroom anymore.

If Sirius was to come back home, he’ll get the Master bedroom, the one his father had, and that’s one more reason not to live in Grimmauld.

(-)

“I am your grandfather,” Cygnus says.

Dora regards him carefully; surely she had her doubts about Cygnus’ identity. She kept asking Sirius if he is his father, until he told her that his dad died.

She stopped asking after that.

They are in private rooms now, at restaurants Cygnus likes. Not to hide Dora, since everyone can see them coming and leaving, but to have privacy.

“You are Mama’s father, then?”

“Yes.”

She plays with her new, shiny Morgana card, flips it over and over between her fingers.

One of the rarest cards in the collection. Cygnus got it for her- Sirius isn’t sure how he managed to do it, but when Dora opened her chocolate card, her smile was so big that surely it was worth it.

“Why don’t you ever visit us?”

“Because your father stole my daughter from me.”

Sirius looks away. He feels a tad guilty, it sucks for Ted, but…well.

“He took her from her family, from our home, from a life of luxury and took her to that tiny, crumbling pigsty where she has to cook and clean like an elf, like a muggle.”

“Daddy works hard to give mama what she wants!” Dora argues, incensed. “Our house isn’t a pigsty!”

It really isn’t. It’s…small, yes, but Sirius had seen way smaller. It has a garden, and it’s orderly, in a quiet neighbourhood.

But Cygnus would never perceive it that way- he probably never got close enough to actually see it, in any case. Yet Sirius has no doubt he had the address for years, now.

“Daddy can’t steal mama! Mama is like super scary when she gets in a mood! No one can steal her or make her do something she doesn’t want to!”

Cygnus ignores it, like he ignored everything he didn’t want to acknowledge, all his life, anything that doesn’t fit with his world view.

“I won’t lower myself to visiting that hovel, or addressing that mudblood thief.”

“Sirius says mudblood is a bad word!” Dora declares, in a fighting mood, her hair turning black, her eyes flashing.

She looks exactly like Bella this way, with anger on her red cheeks.

Cygnus likes Bella the best. She gave him the most trouble, growing up, he hurt her the most, but Bella is his heart, the daughter he can depend on. Bella is the only daughter that truly loves him, that would give her life for him. If Cygnus grows old and frail, it will be Bella that will take him to her home and care for him.

When Cygnus dies, possibly only Bella will grieve for him.

“Sirius says stupid things,” Cygnus says. “Your father is a mudblood. It’s reality. He has no right to Andromeda.” A brief pause. “Or to you. He deprived you of your birthright. Of us, your real family. No one would get scared of your shifting in our home. No one would take you to filthy muggle school. You do not belong there. Such lunacy that befell Andromeda!”

Dora bites her lip. “They don’t like me. My classmates,” she says, slowly. “They don’t want to play with me. My cousins don’t like me either.”

“Of course they don’t, the stupid creatures. They know you are different.”

“But no one likes me here, either,” she whispers. “Because of daddy. Because he is a mudblood-”

“Muggleborn,” Sirius tries to correct her, because Cygnus- well, no use in correcting him, but Dora shouldn’t call her own father a mudblood.

“Shut up!” Cygnus snaps, throwing Sirius a venomous look.

“They call mama a blood traitor-”

“She is,” Cygnus says, vein on his forehead popping.

“You didn’t even want to meet me, I think Sirius had to trick you. My mother has sisters, you know, and they never visit us, either.”

Cygnus gets a devious look in his eyes.

“Would you like to meet them?”

“Yes!” Dora says. “Yes! I want to meet Bella! Mama almost never talks of you people, but she mentioned Bella a few times!”

“You’ll meet her,” Cygnus declares.

When Dora goes to the bathroom, Cygnus turns to Sirius. “We’ll have to approach Bellatrix together,” he says, hastily. “She’ll be especially stubborn about this. She’ll resist me, and you, on our own. But together she has no chance.”

Sirius nods.

(-)

Maybe grandfather had a point, Sirius thinks, when, in line at a muggle shop, he grows annoyed really fast with waiting, and he uses the Imperius on the four people in front of him, to make them leave.

He’s unsettled as he pays for his cigarettes and whiskey.

He usually tried to never use magic on muggles, if he could help it, only in dire circumstances. Even then, when their police would stop him on his bike, he’d use the Confundus.

Now he went straight to the Imperius, without even thinking of it.

They’re just muggles, he tells himself, as he walks away, releasing them from the spell. *I’m just practicing. It was harmless.*

Yet he knows his grandfather wasn’t warning him of dark magic because it could harm those around Sirius. Casting such dark spells, so easily, so often, can harm Sirius.

Or so the books said, but Sirius doesn’t feel harmed. He feels more powerful than ever.

Perhaps the books were wrong. Most likely they were. Old men writing books, trying to dissuade young ones from becoming too powerful, demonising dark magic because otherwise

everyone will grow stronger, and the Ministry certainly doesn't want an incredibly well prepared population, ready and able to fight back, do they?

(-)

Avery is already stammering, voice thin and high with fear, when Sirius enters.

Voldemort, who was glaring at Avery, turns his head slightly to give Sirius an annoyed look.

He seems properly vexed. Sirius can see his fury turning to regret, frustration making his eye twitch. No doubt he wanted to punish Avery. From what Sirius understands, his blunder was quite big, or at least that is what Lucius implied when he asked Sirius to be there for the meeting. 'He might actually kill Avery this time, when he learns the news."

Yet now, with Sirius there, Voldemort won't do any torturing or killing. He truly looks regretful at losing the opportunity to do whatever he meant to do to Avery.

Lucius is tense, but relief flashes in his eyes when Sirius enters.

Poor Avery looks like he died already, shaking like a leaf.

"Sorry I'm late," Sirius says. He hates apologising, but with the Death Eaters there, he figures he should, even if it lacks reverence. "It's because I received troubling news." He keeps his tone grave, when he marches to Voldemort and hands him a rolled piece of parchment.

Sirius lost track of time writing it, got *distracted*, and that's why he was a bit late.

"I believe it's for the best you read it promptly, *my lord*," Sirius says, strolling to his place at the other end of the table.

He never called Voldemort 'my lord'. Or maybe once or twice, but with a very *heavy* dose or sarcasm, in the very beginning of their- of whatever they have.

Now his tone remains grave.

Voldemort's fury is gone already, just from that. He gives Sirius a look, confused yet also hungry.

Look at that, shouldn't have even bothered with the letter, if just 'my lord' made him forget about torture.

"Did I tell you to stop talking?" Voldemort asks Avery, but he isn't looking at him anymore, unrolling the parchment.

Avery talks, mouse like squeaks, and Voldemort tenses all over. Avery closes his eyes in terror, but Sirius knows Voldemort didn't even hear anything, eyes glued to the letter.

Sirius makes sure to keep his face blank, even if he's giddy with anticipation.

Bella and Rodolphus send him inquisitive glances, Lucius an accusatory one that seems to say 'I didn't tell you to make him angrier, you idiot'.

The rest- well, Sirius doesn't care enough to check what the rest are doing. They're all very silent, only Avery's whimpers to be heard as he tries to convey his news, between many 'I'm sorry' and 'It will never happen again' and 'please, my lord'. It's so pathetic. Truly, how can Voldemort be expected to deal with such a fool?

He wonders how far Voldemort got through the letter. He's a fast reader, yet now his eyes travel very slowly over the words.

Sirius started strong, anyway, so it doesn't really matter. But he hopes he already reached Sirius' favourite part.

'I want you to push me down to my knees, keep me there, with your hand in my hair. I'll look up at you, resentful, but you know I like it- just with you; you're the only man I'd ever kneel for."

Voldemort truly has a poker face; great composure. His shoulders tense, his jaw twitches, but otherwise he keeps his composure, perfectly, as he reads the filth Sirius wrote to him.

Avery keeps stammering, sweating so hard it looks like he's crying.

Rodolphus is getting worried, frowning, imagining what news could make Voldemort tense.

Sirius would give anything to know exactly what lines Voldemort is reading.

He must have gotten closer to the end, surely. Truth is, Sirius can't remember exactly how he worded it, what with him getting hotter and *hotter* with every line he wrote. But he's sure he magnanimously gave Voldemort permission to be a little rougher, assured him that while Sirius likes to suck him off, have Voldemort at his mercy, he wouldn't mind it Voldemort would grip his hair tighter, would fuck into his mouth.

'I know I can turn into a dog, but I promise I won't bite. I'll be a good boy for you.'

By that point, Sirius was writing with his right hand, wanking with his left.

Voldemort always lets Sirius fuck him as hard as he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants it, without complaint. Sirius figures he can return the favour on occasion.

He wrote more, the words filthier and filthier as he approached his climax.

He made sure to let Voldemort know, in the letter, that Sirius was pleasuring himself as he wrote it.

‘Just came. On your desk. I’ll guess I’ll see you in a few minutes. Oh, shit, I’m late for the meeting!’

“My lord?” Bella questions, interrupting Avery’s blabbering, the only one brave enough to disturb Voldemort. She probably did it because Voldemort’s eyes stopped moving, clearly done with the letter, yet he’s still staring at the parchment. “Did something happen?“

Voldemort snaps out of it. He looks at Sirius, *incredulity* plain in his eyes, but also that constant hunger there, only now increased tenfold.

He swallows, his Adam apple bobbing up and down.

Sirius keeps his gaze, controlling his expressions. His mum would be proud, no doubt, to see him as blank.

“Yes,” Voldemort speaks, after a few seconds of loaded silence. “Something that needs my immediate attention.”

Some hope and colour blooms on Avery’s cheeks.

“Do you require my assistance?” Rodolphus asks.

“No. Dismissed, all of you-*not you*,” he hisses, when Sirius, feigning ignorance, stands with the rest. “Lucius, fix Avery’s mistake,” he orders, as an afterthought.

“My lord,” Lucius agrees, with a short bow.

“Thank you, thank you-“ Avery almost weeps, but Rabastan takes his arm and drags him out of the room, fast.

All of them file out the door, like ducks in a row. How cute.

Sirius’ face breaks into a grin when they’re finally alone.

“Now, don’t throw a fit, I promise I cleaned the desk, no harm done. No book was defiled-“

Voldemort stands, and Sirius’ cock bravely twitches, even if he just came not long before. But Voldemort looks so determined as he walks to Sirius, a man on a mission.

A terrifying man, with his intense eyes, his intimidating height, his black robes billowing around him, his bone white wand suddenly between his fingers.

But all those things turn Sirius on instead of scaring him.

Voldemort waves the wand and all curtains slam shut, the door glows bright red, and Sirius is sure there’s no force in the world that could come through it.

A few candles flicker to life around the room, and Voldemort’s wand disappears from view.

He stops very close to Sirius, so close that Sirius has to tilt his head back, just a little bit, to hold his gaze.

“You are incorrigible,” Voldemort says. He sounds incredulous, indeed, almost *awed*, as his eyes take in Sirius’ face.

“I figure you like to read, you know? You always swoop through my stuff, trying to figure out what’s going on in my head.”

Whenever Sirius tries to write a song, playing around with some lyrics, Voldemort is always curious to read it, even if it’s not ready, even if Sirius tells him not to, that he’ll hear it when it’s done.

“And this is what is going on through my head most of the times,” Sirius teases him.

While sex is often on his mind, Sirius thinks of other things more, these days, terrifying things, like being able to go to his favourite restaurant with Voldemort, travelling together. Moving into the Back Manor. Together. Truly scary stuff.

Stupid, impossible fantasies, like having James and Peter meet Voldemort, like him. Being able to tell his mates about this, brag that he has the best fucking man in the world, all his.

A fantasy world, in which Sirius can bring Voldemort to Grimmauld, have dinner with his mum, without anyone ending up dead.

It’s as impossible as it is painful, so Sirius prefers to think of sex; that’s possible, real, and it only brings pleasure.

Voldemort brings a hand up and his long fingers tangle assertively into Sirius’ hair, snake like in how fast they got there, how tight they grip.

Yet, never too tight.

He follows Sirius’ instruction from the letter, he pushes Sirius down. The slight pull at the roots of his hair and the feeling of being adjusted against his will makes Sirius’ breath catch in his chest.

He glares up at Voldemort, as he promised he would, but his mouth waters, because Voldemort looks *wild*.

And then:

“Fuck.”

That word, from *Voldemort*? The way he hissed it? Sirius is rock hard, just like that.

Sirius heard loads of things during sex, he said as many himself through the years, truly depraved things. But that simple, common word is the hottest thing he ever heard in his life. He never heard him swear before.

Voldemort has a strange understanding of 'rough' apparently, because he *isn't*. Which continues to be baffling, considering who he is, always ready to dish out violence, yet even when Sirius tells him- well, writes to him- that he can let go, he does not.

That's to say, he keeps his grip on Sirius' hair, and for once he controls everything, from the pace, to how deep he goes into Sirius' mouth, but it's certainly not what Sirius would call rough. Yet he's unyielding, firm, even if unhurried, and Sirius loves it. Mostly because Voldemort is so into it; he always is, when it comes to this.

He doesn't come when Sirius fucks him, and the two times he fucked Sirius he seemed far more engaged, he came, but he was so careful about it.

When Sirius sucks him off, though, Voldemort finally seems willing to simply get lost in the pleasure, occasionally throwing his head back, or closing his eyes, and it drives Sirius feral to witness it.

He apparently enjoys it even more now that he gets to do whatever he wants.

Sirius has gathered experience through the months, knows a few tricks with his tongue that leave Voldemort breathless, knows how to relax his throat, how to take him deeper.

This is new, though, with Voldemort being the one moving, controlling the pace, but Sirius adapts fast, and it's all a matter of relaxing, regulating his breathing.

Although he knows he could stop this at any moment if he so chooses, the illusory feeling of being trapped on his knees by Voldemort's hand as he takes what he wants is almost toe-curlingly erotic

He gets lost in his head after a while, a new thing, an odd, but not unpleasant experience. With nothing to do but focus on his breathing, a strange…he wouldn't call it peace, not exactly, but it feels peaceful nonetheless. His mind is empty, the world dimmed down, but not in an animal like lust-haze as it usually happens when he fucks. No, it's more tranquil than that, even if he's still very much aware of how hard he is, of the hand in his hair, the cock in his mouth- in fact, he's only aware of those things, and nothing else, not even where they are. Well, he's also aware, deeply so, of the man above him, that takes care of Sirius, that touches him with care, even when asked for roughness. An overwhelming shimmering warmth travels up and down his body; the loving, blissful sense of belonging.

When Voldemort comes, Sirius blinks, feeling like he's floating. The world comes back in increments, when Voldemort lifts him up, kisses him. The room takes shape around them, awareness returns, but his body still feels weird- his limbs light, yet heavy at once, hard to control.

Voldemort kisses him for some moments, holding Sirius close, a distinct possessive gesture that screams ownership, before directing them to the nearest wall.

It's more instinct than a decision, when Sirius' hands come between him and the stone. The wall is cold, and that sobers Sirius up a little, his arms tingle, and he's more aware of them now, it feels like they are his.

He shakes his head, blinks rapidly, to clear his head. Voldemort, because he's wearing one of the charmed robes Sirius got for him, is warm at his back, a pleasant contrast to the wall. He's unbuckling Sirius' belt, expertly.

Sirius breathes in, and all of a sudden his strange mood disappears, and lust sinks back into him with a terrible force, as Voldemort's fingers close around his cock.

He feels like himself again, and he wants to come so badly.

He has good stamina, he can last for a long time, but this time-oh, this time he knows it will happen fast.

"You really are a good boy for me today," Voldemort whispers in his ear. "So obedient."

Enjoy it while it lasts, he wants to say, but when he opens his mouth, only a moan falls out.

It comes to him that when they first fucked, it was in this position; Voldemort pressed against the wall, with Sirius fucking him from behind.

This time they are both dressed, and Voldemort isn't fucking Sirius, but it still brings forth that memory.

"Who asked you to distract me?" Even that doesn't lessen Sirius' need to come. Voldemort's fingers twist masterfully around the crown of his cock, making Sirius shudder all over. "I think it was Lucius; for some reason, he insists on protecting Avery."

"I-no-" Sirius struggles to think, tries to thrust into Voldemort fist, but he's held by his hip, tightly.

"Shh," Voldemort goes on, and his tongue leaves a wet trail behind Sirius' ear. "Come for me," he orders, and it appears Sirius' cock is more than willing to obey Voldemort, without question or shame or complicated feelings.

Sirius comes all over Voldemort's fingers, some of it ends up on the wall, drips down to the carpet.

We're in Lestrange Manor, Sirius reflects, once he can think again. He'd laugh about it, if he'd have the energy.

He's spent. Not just because he came two times in less than an hour, he can do that easily. But this last time- *intense*. It makes him sleepy. He's still somewhat floaty.

Like that muggle girl Sirius liked to fuck- they had these interesting games they played during sex, she enjoyed Sirius dominating her, thoroughly, and sometimes she'd sort of…slip away, a glassed look in her eyes, and she'd need a few minutes to collect herself after sex was done. Sirius thinks muggles have a name for it- of course they would, with their obsession with labels- but he can't quite recall it, nor does he care enough to try.

Voldemort turns him around, wandlessly casts a cleaning charm on his hand and on Sirius, buttons up his trousers and puts the belt back in place. As he does all this, he mouths lightly

at Sirius' neck.

"I really am a horrible influence on you," he mutters, as Voldemort keeps him pinned to the wall, touching him, feather light, kissing his jaw, his cheek, sniffing his hair. "What with the smoking, now I got you to swear, making you ignore your responsibilities as a war leader just so you can have sex."

He can feel Voldemort's smile on his skin.

"Don't get upset with Lucius, he's just trying to-"

"Oh, I'm not upset at all. I'm thinking of sending him a gift. I am rather pleased with how this day turned out."

Chapter End Notes

As always, this didn't end how I imagined. It's my own fault, I love writing Black drama and yeah- here we are. Anyway, chapter is incomplete, that's why it ends like that.

The second part of the chapter will be published Saturday night Europe time. So you'll only have to wait a little bit for it.

As always, thank you for reading and for your patience, and I'd love to hear your thoughts! ❤️

AMAZING ART for Sirius/Voldemort: https://www.tumblr.com/slagathormoon/737371382283911168/affection-is-a-weakness-he-still-believes-that?source=share

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> I have worked on this tirelessly for the past two days, so please forgive me if there are more typos than usual! I promised it will come out today, and I don't have the brainpower to edit it once more.
> I haven't even had the time to answer comments on my previous chapter, but, as always, I read them and treasured them all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you afraid of me, Sirius?"

They are in bed, Sirius regaining his breath, on top of Voldemort, his forearms supporting his weight, on either side of Voldemort's head.

It's a very weird time to ask such a question, right after Sirius came. He's still *inside* Voldemort.

"Is this what you think of while I fuck you?" Sirius demands, looking down into those focused, sharp eyes.

Should have let him fuck me instead; or sucked him off. Sirius is sure Voldemort's mind doesn't wander on those occasions, as it apparently does when Sirius fucks him.

"Answer me." Voldemort's voice is soft, his gaze curious and intense, impossible to hide from.

It makes Sirius wonder why he even needs to ask, when it always feels as if Voldemort can see straight into his soul.

He tries to climb off Voldemort, but one of those deceptively thin arms coils around his back and traps him in place, oh so easily.

"No," Sirius says. "Not really," he rectifies.

One of Voldemort's eyebrows lifts, questioningly. "Not *really*," he repeats. He sounds displeased.

A cynical part of Sirius almost wants to ask if he's displeased Sirius doesn't *fully* fear Voldemort.

But he knows it's the other way around. Voldemort doesn't want Sirius to fear him at all.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Sirius clarifies. “But I am aware of…hmm.” Sirius moves one of his arms, his finger smoothing over the frown that appeared between Voldemort’s eyebrows. “Of how powerful you are,” Sirius goes on. “Far more powerful than I am.”

Voldemort frowns harder.

Sirius tries to move again, and this time he’s allowed. He lies beside Voldemort, but soon, Voldemort shifts, and now he’s glaring down at Sirius. “One only needs to worry about enemies being more powerful. I am not your enemy.”

“I know. I’m not worried,” Sirius says. “Just- *aware*. I- well, you wouldn’t understand, would you?”

Voldemort hasn’t met, and never will meet, someone as powerful as he is, let alone someone more powerful.

When he was a child, Dumbledore; but, as he pointed out, Dumbledore was an enemy, in Tom Riddle’s mind, branded as such from a very early age.

He wouldn’t know how it feels to fall in love with someone so out of his league, someone that could destroy him in a second. Someone that sleeps besides him, cooks for him, but, if it came down to it, someone that could easily annihilate him, on a whim.

Sirius smiles up at him. “It feels dangerous,” he explains. “But that’s not really fear, and I like danger. Living on the edge, and all that. If you weren’t this ridiculously overpowered, I probably wouldn’t like you so much.”

Like is a massive understatement. Sirius loves him, he’s obsessed with Voldemort to a terrifying degree. There lies the problem. “It’s more - I fear that I will disappoint you,” Sirius confesses. *Fucking Voldemort. He knows me too well.* He knows Sirius is more open after he comes, more willing to voice things he would struggle with at any other moment. “That one day-“

You’ll grow bored of me. I’ll stop being this new shiny toy.

Though, truly, it’s been a while. They’ve met two years before. They’ve been fucking for around a year now. Sirius has practically moved in with him for a couple of months. And Voldemort doesn’t show signs he’s bored or disillusioned with Sirius so far.

“Anyway,” he says, trying to end this subject. “I’m doing my best to catch up to you,” he jokes.

There’s no catching up with Voldemort. Sure, Sirius is growing stronger every day, seems like it. He feels he left his peers in the dust, behind him. He feels he could destroy most Death Eaters in a one-on-one duel; most Aurors, too.

He feels it’s possible one day, into a not so very distant future, he will become one of the most powerful wizards in Britain- perhaps even Europe, if he works hard enough.

It's not farfetched. Power is in his bloodline, it's his birthright, and Voldemort's tutelage only pushes Sirius further on this path of power.

But he'll never catch up to Voldemort. Not even close. No matter how many books he will read, what he will learn, how much he practices -it's simply impossible.

Men like Voldemort, men like Dumbledore or Merlin, are anomalies, aberrations of magic- their power is not a tangible goal.

Rarities, exceptions. It's a wonder they got Voldemort and Dumbledore in the *same* century. One of these freaks of magic usually comes around every other century or so.

And we got two, in Britain, at once. How lucky. This island is truly cursed.

Or blessed.

Depends how one looks at it.

"At least I scare you productively." Voldemort still sounds displeased, though less so than a minute ago.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "I'm not *scared*," he insists, and he pushes Voldemort off him, with enough force to make him retreat. "Why don't you make me something to eat," he barks, to show he really isn't afraid of Voldemort. "I'm starving."

The fact that he doesn't get murdered or at least tortured on the spot, the fact that Voldemort actually gets up and heads to the kitchen, proves to Sirius he really doesn't have much reason to fear him.

(-)

"You need to learn your limits." Rodolphus takes Sirius aside after a fight with Bella, leading him to his office.

Sirius is still simmering with fury, but is also distantly surprised Rodolphus hasn't already drawn his wand at him, considering how protective he is of Bellatrix, and how *bad* the fight got.

He's also surprised Bella herself backed down, placating. It's not usually her style, especially with the way Sirius was screaming at her, insulting her.

They've had a few fights about Marlene, since they started talking again, but tonight, he truly lost it, got so angry that he drew his wand at her and wanted nothing else but to hurt her, to make her cry. It wasn't even about Marlene anymore, suddenly he remembered all the small ways Bella wronged him, from when he didn't want to give him a cookie when he was four to present days.

“What?” he barks.

“My lord trained me, too. He trained several of us.”

“What does that have to do-“

“But not as much, not as often. Are you practicing daily?”

“Yes,” Sirius says, more and more confused, still just as angry.

Rodolphus eyes him carefully. “You’re becoming unstable, which is a normal reaction to using dark magic *daily*.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake!” Sirius hisses. “Not you, too! You’d think that if this was a real thing, Voldemort would mention it-”

“He won’t. He..” Voice lowered, he goes on. “I don’t think he can tell anymore, when lines are crossed. He couldn’t, with either of us. We had to sort it out ourselves. He’s too…he’s *different*. His power is beyond ours, and he has runes to mitigate some of the…side effects. I don’t think he can tell when it’s enough, when a limit is reached for lesser beings. You’ve reached it.”

“I-”

“I’ve been there. The anger, the temper, the loss of appetite, the loss of sleep-”

“I sleep just fine.”

Rodolphus huffs. “Try not duelling with him for a few days. See how you sleep then.”

“Rodolphus-”

He grabs Sirius’ shoulder. “Get it under control. It *is* happening to you, and it won’t be pretty, going forward. I’ve seen men lost to dark magic, and some can never return.”

“He-”

“He is not like us.”

(-)

Rodolphus wasn’t wrong; when Sirius puts a stop to duels with Voldemort, invoking all sort of excuses, three days in, the nightmares start. Shadowy, vague threats that disrupt his sleep, not enough to truly scare him, but enough to make him uneasy.

He feels nauseous when he wakes up, he feels faint and weak, and a voice whispers he would feel better if he grabs his wand, if-

Voldemort does notice this. “Are you ill?”

He seems slightly worried as he takes Sirius in.

He never stopped. Rodolphus was right. Voldemort doesn’t recognise this, because he is surrounded by dark magic, made and sustained by it. He started practicing the Arts and simply *never* stopped. He never had to experience these symptoms.

Sirius assumes the symptoms would be worse, without the Horcrux on his finger; it feels *soothing*, its magic dark and powerful, steady, a small taste still there, even if Sirius isn’t using it himself.

“I drank way too much,” he says. “Two nights ago, with Rabastan. Messed me up. Guess I’m not as young anymore to be fine after all that.”

“*Not that young*,” Voldemort mutters, and then he laughs.

Sirius loves his laughter, this *genuinely* amused version of it. He only laughs like that when it’s Sirius saying something funny. Or Bella, but Sirius tries to pretend it didn’t happen with her. It was only once, with Bella, and she is unfortunately hilarious when she puts her mind to it. She could even make old Sirius laugh, and that man was no happy drunk.

A strong wave of desire and love washes over him, further confusing him.

It is said dark magic weakens the soul, corrupts it, makes it unstable. That it feeds on hatred, anger, derision, and fear. *That* is supposed to come first- before the temper, the loss of appetite- dark wizards slowly lose compassion for others, slowly lose the ability to love, so focused on hate and anger.

And yet, Sirius loves. He always loved his family, he loves his friends, and he loves Voldemort. More and more, every day.

He has to question some historical ‘facts’, yet he can’t deny anymore that dark magic does affect him in some capacity; it can’t be denied when he’s nauseous and ill disposed, not when something inside him is so ready to curse someone over the most *minor* inconvenience.

He resumes the duels, eventually, but tries not to use dark magic.

“In case I get into a public duel, it wouldn’t do to throw around forbidden curses,” he explains, even if Voldemort doesn’t question this new development.

He defeats Sirius with so much more ease. It’s always easy for Voldemort, but now it’s child’s play.

“*Balance,*” his father once told him. Dark magic is used rather frequently in old families, but they find a balance.

Sirius struggles to find it. He gives in to temptation, and he feels better, afterwards. Better, but angrier.

And then he stops, and he feels ill again.

Bella and Rodolphus are especially patient with him and his worse than ever temper. His mum isn't so gracious, but she always thought him the worst, so she probably doesn't perceive this is different.

Regulus, James, Peter and Lily think it's the stress of the war; everyone is snappy these days, after all, everyone looks ill.

His grandfather keeps bringing up examples of dark wizards that went nuts over the years, not subtle at all.

"Grindelwald wasn't mad," Sirius hisses one day. "Voldemort isn't mad. Some men are powerful enough to withstand it. Don't compare me to riff-raffs."

Fuck it, Sirius decides, tired, exhausted, going back and forth. *I'll deal with it after the war is done.* There's no time now to worry about dark magic and balance and other philosophical questions.

This is not the time to feel weakened and ill; it is the time for power.

And whatever else it may bring, dark magic does deliver on its most appealing promise. It is powerful, unmatched by any other type of magic.

(-)

It takes Sirius a few minutes to acknowledge how *fucked* they are; even after the ambush, even after he realises how outnumbered they are, for a couple of minutes Sirius doesn't worry, because he has Bella and Rodolphus with him, and over the past couple of years he saw proof, time and time again, of how absurdly powerful they became.

But very soon it becomes apparent something is *wrong* with Rodolphus.

Even through the chaos of the ambush, the desperate fighting, Sirius can see that Rodolphus is sluggish, slower than usual.

Half on the Aurors are focused on him, circling him, mostly defensive position, as if waiting for something.

This is wrong.

And then he falls. It happens just as Sirius is in the middle of casting a Killing Curse, so he can't be sure what exactly brought Rodolphus down, but he knows it happens because Bella screams at his side.

“Leave,” she orders. “Leave!” She has stayed at Sirius’ side, glued to him, since they arrived, protecting him, him protecting her, in that loop of devotion they have for each other.

But now she’s ordering him to leave- he supposes the order is meant for the others, too. With Rodolphus out of the picture, she is the highest ranking there.

Sirius doesn’t leave, he would never leave her behind, especially when she charges the Aurors around Rodolphus.

“We can’t!” someone yells. Someone masked, on their side. Apparently, the Aurors already raised AntiApparition wards.

Sirius’ killing curse connects, and an Auror drops dead- the second he killed in the span of minutes.

But there’s no chance of victory. There’s too many of them.

They were expecting us. They knew to expect us.

Sirius wasn’t even supposed to come; it was a last moment decision, when the group was gathering in Lestrange Manor, and someone didn’t show up.

“Perhaps he’s ill, his wife said yesterday that he-” Bella trailed off. *“Do we go without him? We need one more-”* she looked at Rodolphus.

“I’ll come,” both Sirius and Rabastan offered. But Rabastan was sort of drunk already. Sirius doesn’t drink as much as he used to. He doesn’t feel the need, hadn’t felt it in a while.

He’s satiated, always, and he doesn’t feel as hungry or thirsty or in need of mindless drinking. He feels full with power lately.

Rodolphus hesitates, looking at him. “The dark lord-”

“I’m not a child, nor his property,” Sirius snarls. “I can handle myself.”

He knows Voldemort isn’t keen on sending Sirius on missions, and while Sirius is usually grateful, because he has no desire to kill or torture people, kidnap them or any of that, this target is Savage. He has no issues killing Savage or other Aurors in case they show up. Those are trained soldiers, that can defend themselves. It’s fair.

“I’ll check what’s going on with…the other one,” Rodolphus says. They won’t say names, even there, in the Lestrange Manor living room, with only Sirius and Rabastan to hear them. Rodolphus won’t name other Death Eaters. “If he can’t come, fine. You can join us, but only if you ask him, you hear me?”

So Sirius Apparates back to the cabin to retrieve his mask and robe, and to tell Voldemort he’s joining the others. Inform him. He’s going, and that’s that. He doesn’t want to be treated differently, like a housewife, safe at home. He’s a fucking Death Eater, too, and he doesn’t want the others to act as if he’s only the dark lord’s glorified whore.

Alas, when he gets there, Voldemort seems to be in the torture barn, brewing some potions, if he's to judge by the fumes coming out of it.

If he's busy, Sirius thinks, losing his nerve, then no need to bother him. I'll tell him when I get back.

He goes into the cabin, gets his mask and his robe. Before he departs, he has the foresight to leave the ring behind. It is harder than he expected, parting with it. He never had since Voldemort put it on his finger. The ring is always with him, on his finger or around his neck.

He places it in one of the drawers, but he almost doesn't let go of it. It's painful to let go, his entire body rebels against the idea. But just in case things turn south, he won't risk Voldemort's soul ending in enemy hands.

He Apparates back to Lestrange Manor, and Rodolphus arrives a few seconds later, confirming to Bella they are short of a man. When he asks Sirius if Voldemort gave his approval for the new plan, Sirius says he had.

They put their masks and robes on, and then they go outside in the garden, where other masked men await.

There are six of them, and at least two dozens Aurors.

Five of us, he thinks, the shock of it settling in his bones. *With Rodolphus down, there's only five of us.*

Four, he realises, when he sees a masked figure surrendering, kneeling, hands up.

Bella is lost to madness, attacking the Aurors around Rodolphus' body, trying to stop them from reaching him.

He can't be dead. Sirius does not want to think of that, as he twists between spells. He tries to remember if he saw green hitting Rodolphus, but he can't remember.

Another masked figure crumbles under five stunners that hit him in the chest.

Three.

Sirius sees another touching his mark, harshly, calling for Voldemort. He pays for this second of inattention, and he, too, falls, moaning in pain. Sirius thinks this one is Yaxley.

But Voldemort doesn't come in the following minutes, as only Sirius and Bella remain standing.

And then the Aurors start throwing the killing curse around, too, one goes a fraction of an inch past Bella's arm, and-

"Stop!" Sirius yells at her.

So far, the Aurors had refrained from murder, clearly wanting to capture them alive, but Bella is just too strong to bring down.

“STOP!” Sirius lunges through bright lights- one hits him, a subdued purple, excruciatingly painful. A stunner slams into his side, immediately after.

It makes him sluggish, but he’s so *desperate* to reach her that he fights it off, fights the pain off, too.

“What the fuck?” an Auror yells.

He does reach her, even if he should have fallen.

“Drop the wand!” he begs her. If he were alone, he’d fight to death, he has *no doubt* about it. He’d die fighting.

But he’s not alone, and Bella cannot die. She simply *cannot* die, there is no universe Sirius can acknowledge in which Bella would stop existing.

Yet they cannot win. So there’s only one solution left.

It’s best to get captured. Voldemort will get them out. Grandfather. Cygnus. *Someone.*

There’s a chance for her to survive, *after*. But if she doesn’t surrender, they’ll kill her, and there’s no coming back from that.

Another spell hits him, now that he’s not even bothering trying to ward them off, his fingers wrapped around Bella’s robe, weakly.

She screams in frustration, turns to him. Their eyes meet, even through the grills of the eye guards of the mask.

She ceases fighting, rips her left sleeve open, presses onto the mark-

Hands pull them apart, shove them to their knees.

“Useless to call for him,” Savage spits. One of the twins, but Sirius can’t tell witch and he doesn’t care. “We warded against it.”

He sounds so pleased with himself.

Sirius’ shoulders are pulled back, brutally, as magical chains close around his wrists.

And then someone rips his mask off. Savage sneers at Sirius, but he doesn’t look surprised.

Dumbledore told Moody Sirius is a Death Eater, and, no doubt, Moody told all his Aurors about it.

Savage spits on Sirius, sneering. “Scum.”

But they are surprised when Bella’s mask is off. Gasps of shock.

She's struggling in her chains, spitting and hissing, more beautiful than ever, even if her features are transfigured with hate.

"Dear Gods," someone grunts. "He got his wife involved in this shit?! Moody says there aren't any women Death Eaters!"

But Sirius isn't focusing on it.

We warded against it. They did something to stop all magic leaving the area. Dumbledore's work, no doubt. That should be complex, insanely complicated magic to close an area in, to stop the potent magic in the Mark.

The other Death Eaters are brought beside Sirius and Bella. Two kneeling, one unconscious.

Masks off. *Yeah, one is Yaxley*. He's quiet, staring up at the Aurors with a blank face. One is older- Sirius has no idea who it is, and that's a feat in their small world. He's not even remotely familiar.

The unconscious one, Sirius recognises from Hogwarts. A half-blood, Ravenclaw. He'd been a Head Boy when Sirius entered his first year of school. The name eludes him.

Savage is putting a Portal on the ground, giving instructions.

"There's no room for mistake," he says. "We must all leave at once, not a second worth of delay. We can't be sure if the Mark remains active, after these wankers touched it, if it won't call for him as soon as we take the wards down."

Two Aurors are needed to carry Rodolphus over to the circle they've all been manhandled into.

They didn't even bother to take off his mask. Everyone knows who he is.

Bella makes animal like noises when she sees them touching Rodolphus, dumping him on his face.

Sirius looks at the stars. He breathes, deeply, closes his eyes.

And then he goes up.

Lightening fast.

Distantly, he hears thunder, he feels rain on his skin.

He hears 'what the hell?'

But that's very far away.

Sirius is already halfway across the country.

He finds Voldemort in their cabin, in his usual seat by the window, at his desk, arranging some potion vials in a case. He looks up, frowns, sensing Sirius instantly.

We need help, Sirius says, but he obviously has no voice.

Voldemort stands, knowing he's there, but Sirius can't tell him what's wrong, he can't-

He *pushes*, even if he has no body, no arms, but he pushes *something* forward, and the window breaks apart, a shower of glass.

Sirius gasps back in his body, trembling all over. He's drained, it took so much from him to interact with the physical word, even as he wasn't in it- he can't catch his breath.

He can't breathe, can't remember how to do it.

"What's wrong with Black?"

"He's having a seizure or something."

Bella is screaming his name, but he can't do anything about it.

"Must be one of the curses- what did you hit him with, Nothingam?"

He closes his eyes, so he won't see the stars, so he won't be pulled back.

The rain is heavy, drops falling so fast it's almost bruising. Seconds ago, before Sirius took to the stars, the sky was clear, no cloud in sign.

"Doesn't matter, we'll find out at the Ministry," Savage says. "Focus. Get in position."

Hands on him again, lifting him to a kneeling position, all huddled together. It makes breathing even harder.

He opens his eyes, vision blurry, to see everyone is touching each other, and they're waiting for the Portal to activate.

Savage is holding it, and he starts counting.

"Five."

"Sirius! Sirius! You fucking animals, you're killing him, he can't breathe!"

"Four."

"Bella." Rodolphus' dazed voice.

"Fuck, Lestrange is waking up!" An alarmed voice. Wands are now pointed at Rodolphus, who twitches, sandwiched between two Aurros- he's tied up from *head to toe.* They only tied Sirius' and the others' hands and feet, at wrists and ankles, but Rodolphus is covered in magical rope and chains.

“Three-“

The loudest noise Sirius ever heard splits the air. It’s like it splits Sirius’ head open, too.

He would yell, if he had enough air for it. He can’t-

But yells are all around. Bella’s pained howl, Rodolphus’s weak grunt. Aurors swearing in pain also, as all the wards collapse around them, forcefully, brutally teared apart.

Lightening strikes, and for a second, Voldemort glows in the dark, his pale cheekbones and red eyes the only thing visible in the night, in that awful downpour, a heavy curtain of rain.

Air returns to Sirius and he laughs, relief, pain, fear, exhaustion all bubbling in his throat, pushing past his lips, hysterical.

“Two-“ Savage says, but it’s too late.

The Portal flies out of his hand just as it shines golden, activating, inches away from Savage’s reaching fingers, and then disappearing.

Now Bella is laughing, too.

But she’s covered by another loud noise, just as the Aurors turn to face Voldemort, all of them-

This noise is not like the one caused by Voldemort breaking through the Aurors special wards, sudden and piercing.

This one grows in intensity, albeit fast, not high pitched at all. Sirius thinks he’s shaking with pain and laughter, but he then realises he’s not shaking- or if he is, he’s not the only one.

The earth is moving beneath him, making horrifyingly deep sounds.

Voldemort hasn’t moved from where Sirius first spotted him. His wand is pointed outward, diverting all the curses sent his way, but his right palm is held open over the ground.

The earth *splits*. Sirius falls on his side from his kneeling position, as the ground shifts, cracks, collapses all around him.

Bella falls, too. Yaxley, that was attempting climbing to his feet-

And the Aurors.

The night is foggy again, no more curses flying, almost complete darkness if not for the occasional lightning.

Sirius can only see Voldemort clearly, his pale fingers around his wand, the others spread open above the earth.

His eyes shine red.

So much screaming- Sirius winces, gives up on moving, what with…he can't even call it ground anymore. It became something else, something that sucks Aurors in. Branches spring up from the cracks running all around them, wrapping around Aurors.

Bella laughs all throughout it.

And then, as suddenly as it started, it all stops.

Sirius blinks, and nothing is moving anymore. The ground is solid underneath him. There are no more cracks, earth knitting back together under his very eyes.

Only a hand remains stuck above it, the only evidence two dozen Aurors were there just seconds before.

Whatever Voldemort did, it probably targeted any living being around them that doesn't bear a Dark Mark. It burns on his arm, but Sirius barely noticed it, what with everything else happening around him.

He only notices it when it stops, once Voldemort ends the curse.

Sirius blinks again, and Voldemort is right there, above him.

He's on his back, can't remember how he got on his back, but it doesn't matter.

He smiles up at Voldemort, and his heart stops racing in his chest, his lungs expand with relief, and Sirius' mind calms.

Just like that, the rain stops, abruptly, the sky calm and clear once again, a beautiful full moon blessing them with her light.

He looks so glorious above Sirius, he has the most beautiful eyes.

It's so quiet. Bella stopped laughing. Rodolphus grunts again, and she's pulling off his mask, touching his face.

Oh, we're not tied anymore. The enchantments that bound them disappeared with the casters' deaths.

Long, cool fingers are touching his face, and Sirius smiles again.

Voldemort has a cut on his lip, another under his eye, and Sirius lifts his arm, weekly, painfully, to touch back.

"I'm sorry," he breathes out. It's his fault. He shattered that window right in Voldemort's face.

Voldemort stares at him so intensely, it sends a shiver down Sirius' back.

"My lord, our wands-" Yaxley.

It snaps Voldemort out of it. He straightens to his full height, waves his wand carelessly, and the earth cracks open again, small holes-

Wands shoot out of it.

Yaxley catches his, and then he crawls on his knees, and he kisses Voldemort's robe.

It should disgust Sirius. It would have. Hours ago, it would have.

Months ago, it would have made him rage that a proud pureblood, with an ancient name, is kissing someone's robe.

But as the older man Sirius doesn't recognise crawls behind Yaxley and does the same, Sirius isn't disgusted.

Bella would do it too, he knows, if she wasn't busy casting over Rodolphus.

And Sirius wouldn't mind it, even if he saw her crawling.

Because- that's what one does, in front of a god.

They are purebloods, ancient, powerful bloodlines, but they're only little ants at Voldemort's feet.

What he did just then, the way he commanded magic- it's beyond unheard of.

Sirius pushes past his pain, because what is his pain and his exhaustion, what does it matter, so insignificant when he has the chance to touch Voldemort, to worship him, this being made of magic, the most ancient and powerful magic.

But just as he manages to half-way lift himself up, Voldemort steps away.

He moves his wand again, and the older Death Eater drops dead, throat slashed.

The other Death Eater, the Ravenclaw, dies, too, where he still laid unconscious.

Yaxley doesn't even flinch, remains supplicant, on his knees, head bowed, even if blood splashes over his face, from the other poor bastard.

Sirius is confused, he doesn't understand why Voldemort killed them but he doesn't question it- who is he to question the will of a god?

He's shuddering, teeth clattering against each other. He's so cold, and now Voldemort is away, that Sirius is no longer in his divine vicinity, his pain comes back with a vengeance.

Voldemort kneels beside Bella, and then he's casting over Rodolphus, too.

Who finally wakes up.

It takes a few minutes for Rodolphus to recover; in those minutes, Sirius starts thinking clearly again. Or as clearly as the pain allows.

He feels like himself once more, at least. Like Sirius Black, not just a gnat that has no purpose or reason to live outside of worshiping a god.

Voldemort is Voldemort again, too, an extraordinarily powerful dark lord, but just a man.

Sirius' man.

"We've been betrayed," Rodolphus says, as soon as he's properly conscious, after only briefly looking around them, to assess the situation.

"You were cursed," Voldemort says. "Did you see him this evening?"

"Yes." Rodolphus' face transforms with rage. "Right before we left, I went to check on him. But I didn't feel anything-"

"It is a rather subtle curse, a vitality draining ritual. It isn't necessary to be directly hit. Most likely he made a runic circle for it and you stepped inside it when you went to see him."

That would explain why Rodolphus fell so fast. Not as fast as the Aurors had hoped, he still managed to kill one, to fight for minutes, even if he wasn't his usual self.

Rodolphus is the only one speaking to Voldemort. Probably because he wasn't conscious to witness the fucking miracle he just performed, so his voice wasn't robbed by the pure reverence it inspired.

Even Bella is silent, staring at Voldemort with half-hooded eyes, awed. She's always in awe of him, but now it's more evident than ever.

Voldemort says something, softly. Rodolphus frowns, but nods, and Voldemort helps him into a standing position.

Sirius wonders if maybe they should leave- the Portal must have gone back to the Ministry and surely they realised something went terribly wrong on their mission. Shouldn't they send reinforcements?

Isn't it wise to not be there when they arrive?

He laughs again, because- how *silly* of him. As if it matters. Who are they going to send? Legions would fall against Voldemort, and he wouldn't even have to move from his spot to obliterate them.

His laughter makes Voldemort turn to him, and Sirius' pain dims down, because that's just how it is. With those eyes on him, every problem in the world goes away.

Bella supports Rodolphus now, but she's struggling, poor thing, she's a third of his weight and two heads shorter-

They disappear.

"Leave," Voldemort says, advancing for Sirius.

Huh? Sirius opens his mouth, but it wasn't meant for him, apparently, because Yaxley crawls to Voldemort one more time, kisses his robe again, and then he disappears, too.

"How magnificent you are," Voldemort says, voice heavy with passion, and Sirius grows more confused. *Isn't that supposed to be my line?*

Sirius is magnificent? It wasn't him that opened up the earth, and then closed it back together, seamlessly, as dozens of spells flew his way.

"I suppose not many people manage to smash glass into your face," Sirius says, slowly.

Voldemort smiles. "Only you," he says, and he helps Sirius up. "And Billy Stubbs."

"Billy who?" Sirius is instantly jealous. Who the fuck is this Billy, how dare he hurt Voldemort, how dare he exist as a memory in Voldemort's head, be compared to Sirius. "Where is this git?"

"Last I knew of him, he was homeless, lost his leg to an infection. I hunted him down to kill him, a couple of decades ago, but when I saw what he became, I decided his fate satisfied me more."

Ah. Infections that end with loss of limb, homelessness. Muggle, then. "Orphanage mate?" Sirius guesses.

"He wasn't my mate. He was a pest."

"And apparently he hurt you."

"Pushed my head through a window," Voldemort says, and his wand moves over Sirius, his magic safe and healing. "He was upset, you see. I killed his rabbit, and he took it badly."

"What did the rabbit do to you?"

"It existed," Voldemort says, reminding Sirius of James. For a second, tired as he is, he can't tell why this reminds him of James.

James doesn't kill rabbits, he isn't cruel, he wouldn't hurt someone just for existing-

Oh, Snape. Right.

"We were not allowed pets, but Billy was such a little angel, with his blond curls and his toothy smile, and his mother raped and then stabbed to death in front of him, so the Matron allowed him to keep the rabbit when he came to Wool's. I tried to bring a pet, too, but I wasn't allowed. So I killed the rabbit. It was only fair."

What a horrible fucking place. What a ghastly way to raise children.

"I hope you burned that shithole down," Sirius mutters. "With the Matron inside."

"I did." Voldemort smiles at him. "But Cole wasn't inside. Oh, no. I took my time with her."

“Sounds like she deserved it, the cunt.”

Sirius hates, *hurts*, to think of Voldemort’s childhood. It’s just so awful. Cold. Lonely. Brutal.

Sure, it was brutal for that Billy, too, especially with his poor mother, but-

But Billy isn’t Voldemort. Billy is a stupid muggle. Unfortunate that he had that life, yet he was simply a muggle like all other muggles, belonged there, with his kind.

However, to keep a child like Tom Riddle in that hell- that is hard to accept, hard to comprehend.

The heir of Slytherin. The son of a noble, rich muggle. A little genius, special and beyond gifted. He should have never been in that orphanage.

Everyone is at fault here; Voldemort’s father, the Gaunts, yes.

The entire wizarding world. They are supposed to look after their own. They have *magic*, and yet they let a child slip through the cracks, abandoned him, ignored him, left him to such an awful muggle fate that was not meant for him.

Even when he was at Hogwarts, when he was known, and found, and brought *home*- they still sent him back to the muggles, and that’s unforgivable.

It is. Someone should have given him shelter.

Sirius feels a swell of hate, for all those rich families, the Sacred Twenty Eight, that did nothing, because Tom’s blood was impure.

He feels even more hate for the muggle loving, peace and equality preaching wizards and witches. What excuse did they have for not taking Tom in?

So many people- an entire country- failed Tom Riddle, and it suddenly makes so much sense that they should pay for it. Collectively.

“You learn through punishments,” his father once told him, when Sirius complained his punishment was too harsh, that it wasn’t needed, that he learned his lesson.

And he did learn his lesson, but only because his father punished him.

Perhaps Voldemort will teach the wizarding world better.

“Why did you kill them?” he asks, when Voldemort burns the bodies of the Death Eaters.

“They saw yours and Bella’s faces. They didn’t hold enough of my confidence for such delicate information.”

Voldemort Apparates them away to their cabin.

It’s chilly inside, the curtains flying around, glass still on the floor.

Sirius shivers, remembering *he* did that, while he was miles and miles away.

Perhaps he is magnificent, too.

Voldemort directs him to the bathroom, but Sirius resists, shivering. He stumbles his way to the nightstand, and retrieves the ring. He breathes a little easier as soon as he puts it on. He closes his eyes in relief.

"It's as if you knew you shouldn't have gone there," Voldemort says, observing him. "For future reference, if you consider my Horcrux wouldn't be safe somewhere, then *you* should not be there, either."

"Look, I'm too exhausted to turn into Padfoot, so you'll just have to imagine his puppy eyes staring up at you, and take some pity on a poor, tired dog, yeah? Besides, it turned out fine, in the end."

Voldemort blessedly lets it go.

Minutes later, he sinks into the bathtub, hot water soothing some of his aches, giving him some warmth.

Voldemort doesn't get in, sits on the edge, watching Sirius. He didn't even heal the cuts on his face. Sirius has to remind him he's bleeding, and Voldemort seems surprised to discover it, reaching up with his fingers to feel the small injuries.

Who knows how long they stay like that, in silence and safety. Sirius feels better by the minute, but he also feels drowsy. It's a struggle to keep his eyes open, but when Voldemort offers to take him to bed, he shakes his head.

He likes the hot water, the only antidote to the *ice* inside his veins; he likes the candles on the walls, Voldemort sitting there, looking at him, keeping threats at bay.

Threats that are forming somewhere in Sirius' brain, but dormant, too afraid of Voldemort to come forth.

"My lord?"

Sirius startles, his heart rate shoots up-

"A second," Voldemort answers, and he stands.

That was Rodolphus' voice.

How the fuck is that man still standing and Apparating around? What a legend.

But Sirius doesn't like him inside the cabin. In their space. No one should be there, beside Sirius and Voldemort.

Voldemort helps him out of the bathtub. Sirius sways on his feet, but he assures Voldemort he can dress himself, and then proceeds to do so, when Voldemort leaves.

As soon as he's alone, he knows he doesn't want to be alone. He gets so anxious, he almost bolts after Voldemort half naked.

Sirius breathes in, counts to five, releases the breath. He touches his ring for comfort, caresses it with his thumb, and then puts on the rest of his clothes.

"We got him," Rodolphus' voice is filled with fury. "He fled, but we found him. He was in a safe house, with two Aurors, but Lucius managed to find out where."

"Any more issues?"

"No."

"Bring him to the Hall. I'll be over momentarily."

"May I-" Rodolphus trails off.

"Speak."

"Bella said no one could reach you through the mark. That they did something-"

"Dumbledore's handiwork. Quite clever, that old goat. A rare thing, an ancient shielding charm."

"Yet you still came for us," Rodolphus says, just as Sirius makes his way to the living room.

Rodolphus looks like shit. Incredibly pale, his red hair doing him no favours, the only colour standing out.

He has bruises all over, his jaw clenched in pain, but his eyes are restless. They slip to Sirius, only for a moment, before returning to Voldemort.

"Sirius has other means of contacting me," Voldemort says. "Means beyond mortal comprehension."

Even as he collapses on the couch, Sirius feels a surge of pride. But it's small, lost in the turmoil inside him. He's agitated, on edge, even if exhausted.

He's freezing, now that he's out of the scalding water.

Rodolphus nods, not arguing it, not insisting to know more. He looks to Sirius again, and he nods in acknowledgement, in gratitude.

"Not as useless as you thought, huh?" Sirius mocks.

"I never said you are useless."

He didn't. He called Sirius many things, but never useless.

Rodolphus leaves, and Voldemort goes to the kitchen. He comes back with a cup of tea, some minutes later, and a vial of potion.

“I won’t be returning until morning,” he says, summoning a pillow, propping it under Sirius’ neck and shoulders.

“What is the Hall?”

“It’s where I hold large meetings.”

Ah, that place. Where Sirius was forced to kneel. Back when he was still such an idiot, clinging to his stupid pride.

“It seems Death Eaters need a reminder not to cross me. In fact, I think the entire country needs a reminder.”

“I want to come.”

“No.” It’s said softly, yet firmly. Sirius understands there will be no convincing him, just from his tone.

Besides, Sirius isn’t feeling his best. He’s not feeling well at all.

“Who’s the traitor?”

“Ambrose Brackstone.”

Sirius knows of Brackstones. A relatively old family; old enough, pure enough. Rich enough. Held down position in the Ministry, significant enough, for a century or so.

He can’t be sure if the face of the Brackstone he remembers was this Ambrose or not.

“Sleep.” He bends and kisses Sirius’ forehead.

It’s such a casual closeness. Something that has crept up on them both without even realising.

When Voldemort tries to retreat, Sirius grabs the front of his robe.

He is so cold; he’s shivering, and he feels awful.

His grandfather’s warnings about dark magic rush through his memory, but it’s distant. Sirius feels unmoored, wrong, unnatural. He knows he went too far, that he shouldn’t have been able to do what he did.

His eyes fall on the window he shattered; it’s fixed now, but Sirius remembers breaking it, while he was hundreds of miles away.

His practice with Voldemort is making him stronger, he can feel it, all those duels, all those projections, Voldemort’s guidance.

But it comes with a cost.

He doesn’t properly feel his body, as if a part of him is still lost somewhere in the night, up in the sky.

All he feels is cold.

Fear. It was kept in check, with Voldemort beside him, but now Voldemort will leave and Sirius dreads it; he doesn't want to be alone, he has this feeling at the edge of his consciousness that something is waiting in the shadows for him, that it will pounce as soon as Voldemort leaves the room.

"Hold me," Sirius whispers.

Voldemort leans over him, scattering his cheeks and jaw with lingering kisses. He manoeuvres them unit they're both lying on their sides, facing each other, the couch getting bigger to accommodate them.

One of his arms moves along Sirius' ribs, travels along the tensed muscles of Sirius' arm, until his fingers reach Sirius', and they interwind together.

Sirius hides his face in his neck. He's so cold, even Voldemort's skin feels warm to him.

The ring is warm, too.

Sirius shivers, burrows closer into Voldemort, squeezes his fingers between his own.

Let him go, he has stuff to do, he can't sit here and babysit you. It's bad enough he delayed to make tea for Sirius, while Death Eaters and traitors wait for him.

You're not a fucking child, let him go.

"Hold me," Sirius asks, again, even if he's already being held.

And it does feel good. Better. The longer he's in Voldemort's arms, the easier he can breathe.

It's as if he settles back into himself, little by little; Voldemort tells him he'll be alright, that he only needs to rest, that nothing will harm him.

The potion vial he brought from the kitchen flies to them, and Voldemort gently lifts his head, makes him drink it.

It tastes vile, horrible beyond belief, but Sirius trusts it will do him good, if Voldemort gave it to him.

"Better?" he asks, a few minutes later, right as Sirius does feel better.

He doesn't admit to it, knowing Voldemort will leave once he does.

"What if they took me?" Sirius asks. "To Azkaban-" he shivers, violently, because he can't even *think* about Azkaban. Those small cells, the cold, the dementors.

The memories, his worst memories, trapped with his father, on his last day, on a loop.

Voldemort touches his face, and Sirius opens his eyes, not realising he'd closed them.

Voldemort looks fiercer than ever. “I would have burned it to the ground. You’d have spent mere minutes there.”

Sirius believes him; he remembers a time when Bella seemed so unconcerned with the prospect of being arrested, back when the Karkaroff debacle happened. Sirius thought she was insane to put so much faith into Voldemort. But those days are long gone.

Sirius knows breaking Azkaban apart would not be an issue for Voldemort, wouldn’t even require too much effort.

“Minutes feel like ages in that place,” Sirius whispers. “I hate it. I didn’t know- I’ve never been, before I sought Morfin. It was horrible. I-“ He shivers again. “Are Dementors truly your allies?”

Dumbledore always said so, even if no one believes him.

“Yes.”

“How can you stand them?”

Voldemort must have horrifying memories, that would put Sirius’ worst ones to shame.

So many awful things happened to him, that even now, as the most powerful dark lord, he wakes up from nightmares with a wild expression in his eyes.

How can he stand being around Dementors?

Voldemort’s fingers move from Sirius’ cheek, over his lips. They rest there, briefly, before he takes his hand away, kisses Sirius lightly. After that he extricates himself from the embrace, stands to his full height.

All traces of the gentleness he just displayed, that he always displays when alone with Sirius, melt away.

He will do awful, awful things when he gets to the Hall, it occurs to Sirius.

He looks ready and capable of committing unnamable acts of violence; his face resumes its usual harshness, his eyes burn with fury, and he appears to be nine feet tall, from Sirius’ point of view, laid on the couch as he is, looking up.

Not an hour before, he was a god, a benevolent god that answered Sirius’ prayers, and came to rescue him and Bella and the others.

He looks like a god now, too, but there will be no saving whoever betrayed them. No, there will only be wrath, there.

“No one preys on me,” he answers. “Every sentient creature on this earth knows better than to try. Dementors are no exception.”

(-)

He wakes up in bed, even if he remembers falling asleep on the couch, not long after Voldemort left. There must have been something in the potion that forced him to sleep, because as soon as Voldemort left, Sirius curled around himself on the couch, overwhelmed with fear.

He felt as if the entire world will come after him, will hurt him. He was afraid there were enemies inside the cabin-

You're paranoid, there's nothing here, he kept telling himself, and he clung to his ring, the only safe thing around. *Dark magic messes with the mind,* he told himself. *It's just that*. He simply used too much, went too far. Besides, who even knows what astral magic would do to the mind?

You're just paranoid, Sirius, nothing will hurt you.

He wanted to turn into Padfoot, but then if he did, he wouldn't be able to hold the ring to his chest, what felt like his only defence.

There's no way he'd have fallen asleep without whatever Voldemort gave him.

He feels loads better. His body aches, but that's normal, he had quite the night. Usual soreness.

He's not cold anymore, his heart isn't trying to explode inside his chest. He feels *normal.*

The sun is high in the sky; mid day at the very least.

Sirius stretches, and he notices the ring is back on his finger, even if he remembers taking it off, to hold it close to his chest.

When he wanders into the living room, Voldemort stands from where he was seated, at his desk. "How are you feeling?"

"Alright." Sirius yawns. "Better."

Voldemort smiles. "Come, you should eat something. You slept for almost sixteen hours."

"Can't I eat here?" Sirius complains, even as he walks to the kitchen. He knows Voldemort wound never let him eat in the living room. "Haven't I earned that, what with my display of magic last night?"

He isn't really hungry, but he doesn't say it. Twice, he told Voldemort he wasn't hungry in the past, and Voldemort looked almost…*sad* to hear it. It was bizarre, but Sirius doesn't like to see him sad, so he eats when he's offered food.

Besides, when he sits at the table and Voldemort takes off the charms from the plate already waiting for him, heavenly smells invade the kitchen, tempting. It awakens some hunger inside him.

Bacon, eggs, beans. Even the bread is fresh and warm. *He must have just bought it.* Surely, he hasn't started baking, too.

He always cooks, and he cooks very well, but Sirius is yet to see Voldemort bake.

He laughs, imagining him going to a muggle bakery and buying bread, sitting in a line, perhaps, with his Tom Riddle glamour.

He knows that can't be true- not the buying part, at least. If anything, he stole the bread.

Which only makes it taste better.

He sits beside Sirius, sipping at his tea, watching him eat.

Voldemort eats at dinner, small bites, never finishing what's on his plate.

Never breakfast, though. Granted, Sirius sleeps through the mornings, so maybe Voldemort eats at the crack of dawn, when he wakes up. Maybe Bella feeds him. He knows most mornings, Voldemort goes to have tea with her at a ridiculous hour.

"Did you solve the traitor issue?" he asks, once his plate is almost as clean as if he'd washed it.

Voldemort hands him another potion vial and Sirius takes it without question.

"I did, yes."

He stands, picks a newspaper off the windowsill, and brings it back to Sirius.

It's lucky Sirius has a tough stomach, not prone to throwing up.

There aren't pictures published with the article, but the descriptions are enough.

Ambrose Brackstone was found in the middle of Diagon Alley, tied to a pole.

Flayed.

His face was still there, presumbly so people can recognise him, even if he was missing his eyes.

Then there were pieces of skin left on his chest that spelled 'traitor'.

The rest, a bloody mess.

"How is he still alive?" Sirius asks, because they found him screaming his head off, the Prophet says.

“Advanced preserving and protective charms on his major organs.”

“Isn’t skin a major organ?”

“The organs he has left,” Voldemort rectifies. Sirius looks up to find him smirking. “I hear the Healers are struggling to take them off. They’re also struggling to regrow his skin, but they won’t be able to. Apparently there’s an emergency Wizengamot meeting, to ask permission to kill Brackstone, since it is the only ‘humane’ thing left to do. They haven’t managed to stop him from screaming, either. My spies tell me they just placed silencing spells on his hospital room.”

Sirius swallows, but then he remembers how close they got to being arrested, Bella’s scream when Rodolphus fell, her desperate eyes when she and Sirius were pushed to their knees.

How close they got to dying.

To Azkaban.

No, he feels no pity for the traitor.

He does feel *something* when he reads his entire family died. Their heads were in several places. A couple in Diagon Alley, on *spikes*; one in Hogsemeade, above the sign that points to Hogwarts; one in the plaza of the village where the Minister lives, and two more at the Ministry- one in the Atrium, one in Crouch’s office.

Seven Brackstones. All of them.

Another family line ended.

He knows the killing and the flaying happened at the Hall, under the watch of every single Death Eater. Voldemort probably killed Brackstone’s family members before he tortured him.

He knows no one will betray Voldemort again.

Their world must have gone to hell while Sirius slept. They’ll be especially worried about the heads found in the Ministry and in the village where the Minister lives- it will make them paranoid, because how did those heads get there?

“You once said that it isn’t…beneficial to the cause to kill children, that it will make neutral families think you monstrous,” Sirius says, carefully. “Yet one of the Brackstones was fifteen.”

Just returned from Hogwarts, for the holiday.

“I don’t recall saying that to you.”

“I wasn’t there; it was- I saw it in Bella’s memories, after Marlene died. I wanted to check if you ordered it, and I went into her head.”

He keeps his gaze on the newspaper.

“They’ll think me monstrous, anyway. Those that hadn’t picked a side by now, are already my enemies. Besides, while it is not my goal to hurt children, sometimes children have to die, for strategic reasons.”

That is so fucked up.

Voldemort’s fingers go under his jaw, raise Sirius’ head up, until their eyes meet. “I know you do not like it, but this is war, Sirius. A child or two means nothing in the grand scheme of things.” His fingers tighten around Sirius’ jaw. “I give you my word it will not happen often; only rare exceptions. Sometimes, there is no avoiding it.”

His eyes are so intense, as if he really wants Sirius to believe him, as if it’s highly important.

“Did you- were you the one to kill him? The boy?”

He wishes it wasn’t Voldemort. It’s *sick*, but he wishes it was some Death Eater that carried it out-

“Yes.”

“Fuck,” Sirius mutters, looking at the newspaper again.

“He didn’t suffer. He died first. I take no pleasure in terrorising young boys. But a point had to be made. No one betrays me and gets away with it.”

“Some of your Death Eaters have children,” Sirius says. “Many of them, actually. And a majority of them love their children. What do you think went through their minds when you made them witness that?”

“Hopefully, it occurred to them that if they love their children, they better not betray me. As I said, I had to make an example out of Brackstone.”

Sirius rubs his temples, supports his head in his hands.

“If someone close to the Blacks had threatened your family, if someone had almost killed members of your family, what would Orion have done to that person? A person he trusted but stabbed him in the back?”

Sirius doesn’t want to think about it.

“What would Arcturus do? Or old Sirius I hear so much about? Do you know how much blood was on his hands? Do you realise why your family has the reputation it does? You think it came with them acting nice? You think someone placed a bloodline curse on your family because they were gentle men?”

“No. Of course they would have killed a traitor that caused so much harm. They *did* kill traitors,” Sirius says. While no one sits them down as kids and boasts of such things, Sirius heard rumours. Indeed, his family has a reputation.

Especially great grandfather Sirius. Those were…wild times he lived in.

“But just the traitor, not his fifteen-year-old son,” he goes on.

Voldemort laughs. It doesn’t sound mocking, not even amused.

“Do you truly believe that?”

Sirius doesn’t answer.

“For the good of your family, I hope you do not. You are head of house now. I am sure your ancestors would agree that if a threat were to rise against you, you must eliminate it. Entirely. No matter their age. You wipe them out, before they can become a proper threat. It is the sensible thing to do.”

“*You* were a threat to my family,” Sirius says, head still in his hands. “Grandfather thought you so, probably still does. My father didn’t like you either. And yet-”

“They couldn’t kill me. Rest assured, if they thought they could have, they would have. If I had a family of my own, they’d have killed them, too, they would have made sure no one will live to avenge me. Ask your grandfather or Cygnus or Abraxas, ask them about the meetings they held, a decade ago, where they pondered if they can kill me or not.”

Sirius groans.

“It was Orion that advised them not to do it, I am told. A wise man, your father. He decided that if they were to try to kill me but fail, then I might prove…vengeful. But make no mistake, Sirius, when they decided not to try, they threw their support behind me. The blood I spill, it’s on their hands, too.”

Voldemort stands, comes behind Sirius, places a hand on his shoulder. “We live in such times that seventeen-year-olds are acting as soldiers. You’ll find more children of that age in Dumbledore’s army than in my own. This one was almost sixteen; what is the difference between a sixteen-year-old and a seventeen-year-old? A legal one, perhaps, but not a moral one. In times of war, one’s innocence doesn’t protect them.”

“And in time of peace?” Sirius asks. “When you are in charge, will there ever be peace?” He stands, turns around, meets Voldemort’s eyes without blinking.

“Yes. There will be peace, and children will be children once more, safe in their houses. But to get to peace, sacrifices have to be made.” He brushes his knuckles on Sirius’ cheek, briefly. “Didn’t Dumbledore tell you that?”

He had, sadly.

(-)

Lily looks pale when Sirius Apparates to Godric's Hallow. James looks pale, too, withdrawn, the paper crumpled in the bin, but the knowledge in their heads. If only it was as easy to discard the details they read, as easy as throwing away the Prophet.

"They didn't say in the paper, but I flood Alice this morning, to ask how she deals with Neville's teething. She said nineteen Aurors haven't returned from a mission last night. She didn't know more, but-" Lily swallows."Nineteen. *Gone*. No trace of them left."

Sirius isn't surprised that didn't make the paper, that they will try to hide they lost a tenth of their already diminished Auror force in *one* night. Wouldn't do to alarm the public.

People are already plenty alarmed as it is.

"It's probably related," James whispers. "What with Brackstone and 'traitor' written on him."

"Sounds like it," Sirius says, choosing to look at Harry, and not at his friends' stricken faces.

Harry doesn't know what's going on. He isn't sad, he isn't terrified. He's happy, smiling up at Sirius. His eyes are now the same brilliant green Lily's are.

Which is fair. The rest of him is James, from the hair, to his features, even his expressions. It's truly remarkable how much he looks like James.

How much Draco looks like Lucius. Though, Draco has trademark Black eyes, a specific shade of grey, different from Lucius'. Draco's nose is upturned, more Cissa than Lucius. His hair is not almost white, as Lucius', but not honey blonde like Cissa's, either. Somewhere in-between.

Even so, Draco very clearly takes after his father, but Harry is almost an exact copy of James.

Sirius loves them. Besides Voldemort, Harry and Draco are the only ones not stressed out. Well, Bella isn't stressed, either, but she's intense and focused, and rambling about war often.

Harry and Draco just want to be held; Sirius can make them laugh with a wave of his wand, and his little charges giggle and try to reach for the lights that shoot off.

Apparently Draco is a crier- Lucius looks half dead these days, not managing to have a single full night of sleep since Draco's teeth started coming in.

Cissa is exasperated, begging Sirius to take Lucius away for a night, because he's annoying her, and terrifying the elves. He insists on being the one to run to his son's room when he hears the cries at night, cursing the elves if they even try to touch Draco.

At least this means Cissa sleeps. And on the rare occasions Lucius leaves the Manor, she has no problems using their elves to help with Draco.

Draco never cries when Sirius is there, however.

Neither does Harry. Though apparently Harry is usually quiet, only howling occasionally and for short periods.

Sirius smiles back, and Harry clasps his little hands, excited, perched on Sirius' lap.

"He has men in the Ministry," James says.

"We always knew that," Lily counters, biting her nails.

"Yeah, but he has men there bold enough to leave a freaking head in *Crouch*'s office! An office that is crazy protected, by spells and Aurors. It must be someone big-"

"And Hogsmeade," Lily adds, so incredibly pale, her freckles standing out. "The Ministry has been compromised for a while, James. but Hogsmeade? So close to Dumbledore?"

"What would old blood purists think?" James asks Sirius. "Brackstones were blood fanatics, too, they were quite awful actually, and close to the Sacred Twenty Eight. Won't this upset blood purists? Another pureblood family wiped out?"

"Why are you asking me?" Sirius snaps. "Do I look like a blood purist?"

James falters. "I didn't mean it like that! I only meant that you understand how they think better and- Sirius, I didn't mean it like *that*-"

"I know!" Sirius shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Jamie. I know. It's- I'm just-"

James relaxes. "Yeah, no. We're all testy, obviously."

Harry frowns, sensing the tension. Sirius bends to kiss him, running his fingers on his little back.

"We should leave," Lily says, quietly.

James and Sirius turn to her. "What?"

"We should leave the country."

"I'm not running from my own home," James says. "If we all run, he wins by default."

"Many are running," Lily goes on. "Jack left last week, I told you. And Mary left the week before-"

"Mary?" Sirius frowns. "Macdonald?"

"Yes. She went to her cousins in Spain."

"Lily, I'm not leaving my world, serving it on a platter to him," James insists.

Jack and Mary and many that are leaving are muggleborns. This isn't their world. But James…

Though, Sirius wonders, it would be the muggleborns' country, too. They were raised in Britain, after all, muggle or magical. Apparently they don't consider even the muggle part safe anymore.

“We can’t fight,” Lily says. “What with Harry, we can’t fight, we can’t be of any help, to anyone. Neither of us has any family to speak of in Britain.”

Her parents died, too. She only has that horrible sister she doesn’t talk to.

“I have family here,” James says, a tad harshly.

Lily bites her lip. “We can all leave. All of us, Peter and Remus.”

“Lily,” James says, gentler now. “Peter can’t leave his mum; she’s sick. Remus is a werewolf, it will be close to impossible for him to be granted refuge in any country-”

“In any magical part. But we can go the muggle route. No one will check for werewolves there, after all.”

“You want us to live like muggles?” Sirius asks, perturbed that someone would even consider such a thing.

“Only for a while-”

“We don’t have muggle papers, remember?” James, too, looks at her as if she’s lost her mind. “Not Sirius, not Peter, not me. Not Harry, either-”

“We should have them made, I told you I want Harry to have a birth certificate! Even if the war ends and we all live in a fairytale where all is well, I want him to have muggle papers, James.”

“Why?”

“For school! He should go to muggle school, as all children, make muggle friends! I don’t want him growing up like-”

“Like *what*?”

“I want him to have a broader understanding of the world.”

Sirius gets up, takes Harry with him to the garden. He doesn’t think either of them should be there for what seems an uncomfortable conversation.

Perhaps there is some truth to the idea that purebloods and muggleborns shouldn’t marry. Not for the blood crap, obviously. But all these things, all these differences that never seem to end.

Lily and James had been married for three years now, and their very different ways of viewing the world still hadn’t coalesced into a perfect union.

(-)

His father's grave is still obviously taken care of.

Dobby was certainly instructed to look after their dead, but even so, his father's grave remains the one that gets the most attention.

It could have been Regulus' that gave this order, but Sirius very much doubts it.

This is Sirius' fourth time visiting, but he's yet to say a word. But that's alright, his father liked silence.

He usually stays there for a quarter of hour or so, forcing himself to get accustomed to it. Can one ever get accustomed to it? To a cold statue, a headstone, instead of a father?

He looks at his father's statue, at his great grandfather's; Sirius brings him a bottle of firewhiskey every time he comes, like he promised that first time, when he was naked and suffering and thought his life ended.

The bottles disappear, every time. He wonders who takes them. Dobby, or Tessuth, but what if his mother actually comes in person, and she drinks them?

Just to spite his dad. *Gods, Father would be furious if he saw her these days, drunk at almost all times of the day.*

His great grandfather would laugh, though.

Sirius looks at them, all majestic and bronze, reads their many accomplishments inscribed into the headstones.

You really were hard men, weren't you? Hard men that did horrible things.

It's not like Sirius ever thought they were nice; but lording their wealth over the poor, mocking politicians, influencing and bribing people never seemed so bad. It was sort of normal, really.

They were family men, they had wives and children and attended glamours parties.

But Voldemort is right. They weren't just that. They weren't in a war, true, there was no violence spiralling out of control, but probably because they snuffed any threat before it could have the chance to evolve into all out opposition or strife.

His great grandfather especially. There are rumours he had seven Wizengamot members killed, in just as many years.

"They like to gossip about us," his father said, when Sirius first heard this rumour and asked him if it was true.

Yet he didn't say it *wasn't* true.

"Don't bend your ear to what riff-raffs have to say about our family. Those people don't matter."

His father did something to a Minister once, Sirius recalls. To their first muggleborn Minister.

He has no idea what, he was young and didn't care, but Abraxas and his father had something to do with something big, he knows that much.

He can't even remember the man's name, because he wasn't Minister for long, and because everyone stopped talking about him, after.

Did he have a family? A son? A wife? What happened to his family? What happened to the poor bastard that reached too high, that thought he can be a muggleborn Minister for Magic and keep that position, in a world ruled by Blacks and Malfoys and Lestranges?

What exactly did we do to the witch or wizard that cast the bloodline curse on us, that wanted us to watch our sons die, or be forced to kill them?

Did someone in his family wipe that person's family out? Did a Black murder their children, for such a curse to be cast upon them, Dark Magic of this magnitude, that would require the caster to sacrifice their own life to power it?

Someone literally killed themselves to punish Blacks, and surely they must have had a serious reason for it.

His father's eyes, even bronze, are as cold as they have been in life. Orion Black was a civilised man, he looked for non-violent solutions, he was an aristocrat that didn't bother himself with those below him.

He was no Voldemort, that is certain. He didn't need to be. He had it all since he was born. He didn't need to fight for the world. He only needed to keep it, to eliminate a provocateur here, one there, instead of waging nationwide war.

If his father murdered someone, if he had someone killed, he wouldn't have been proud of it, he wouldn't show it off, like Voldemort does. He most definitely wouldn't tell his wife and children about it.

But does that really matter, at the end of the day? Does it make that much of a difference?

What Sirius knows for certain, because Voldemort told him, and Sirius believes him, is that his father, at least once, sat in a meeting with other *respectable* men and considered if they should or should not kill Voldemort, when he returned from his travels; that the only reason they didn't kill him, was because they didn't think they could.

He looks at his father, and he knows, he feels it in his bones, that his father would have had a thousand sixteen-year-old kids killed, if it meant keeping his family safe, if someone would have threatened Sirius' life.

You would do the same, his father's eyes tell him, from behind his headstone. *If it meant protecting those you love, you would do the same. If someone betrayed you, endangered those*

you care for, you'd kill them, too.

Sirius already is a murderer; not only that, he killed civilians. If he can find excuses for what he did in battle-

Parkinson was, technically, a civilian. An old man. *An old man that certainly had blood on his hands, too,* a voice whispers.

Perhaps. But those poor muggles?

You did it to end their suffering.

Are these just excuses he makes for himself so he can sleep at night?

He decides it's hypocritical of him to be bothered now. He already moved past it, when Marlene's family died. Her *nine year old* nephew.

He moved past it when he laughed and ate and drank with Rabastan and Lucius and Rodolphus, all murderers in their own right.

Not to mention Bella.

It's too late to grow a conscience, Sirius decides. It really is too late, and it's useless. He wants what he wants, he loves who he loves, and nothing will change that.

Over the next few weeks, it becomes clear what impact the Brackstones had on the war.

Voldemort was right. He made a *point*.

Their world devolves into chaos, into the last stages of the war. A nation brought down to its knees, neck stretched, waiting for the final blow to fall.

But it will rise again, Sirius reminds himself. It will. And he can grow a conscience, then. He can do better, he can help his family, his friends and his country, but first, they need to win.

First, they need peace.

(-)

Paul dies in a mission, with only Rabastan around to witness an 'Auror' killing him.

Rodolphus is so enraged when he finds out, that Voldemort himself has to keep him from hurting Rabastan.

"It was done with my knowledge and approval," Voldemort says, putting himself between the brothers.

It's the first time Voldemort has to physically control his Death Eaters during a meeting. All the others are quick to flee the room, when Voldemort's attention remains on the brothers.

Rabastan hides behind him, as Voldemort speaks for long enough to snap Rodolphus out of a murderous rage, something about Paul's death being beneficial for the cause, since Lucius will send a letter to Paul's family, telling them Aurors murdered their poor innocent boy in cold blood. "It would garner us international support," Voldemort says, though it's clear he doesn't really care about that.

When he judges Rodolphus is rational again, he leaves, a heavy silence falling in his wake.

"What now?" Rodolphus hisses, barely able to look at his brother, disgust on all his features. "The Macnairs will be poor again, a young pureblood that was on our side is dead, and that whore will have to marry once more, someone worse than Paul this time, since she's a cheating widow no good man will take. What did you solve?"

"She won't have to marry again," Bella says, and now Rabastan goes closer to her, since there's no more Voldemort to hide him. "She's pregnant. The child is a boy and will inherit Paul's wealth, or a great portion of it, anyway."

Fuck, I wish they'd have given him this news while Voldemort was still here.

All the muscles on Rodolphus' face twist in what looks like a painful manner. He steps forward, but Bella moves too, shielding Rabastan, even if she's a head shorter and so much slimmer. It is enough to stop Rodolphus, but he only looks more disgusted.

"You all knew," he says, meeting Bella's gaze. "You planned this behind my back. You cover for him, and Lucius no doubt saw an opportunity to gain financial support from Australia. You even dragged my lord into it."

Silence.

"I didn't know," Sirius offers, unsure who he's supposed to side with.

Usually he sides with Bella and Rabastan, but-

Poor Paul. That was just…unnecessary. Paul died because Rabastan didn't have the balls to stand up to Rodolphus and marry Evy.

"Of course you didn't know," Rodolphus says. "You're an honourable man, unlike my brother. You'd have protested to this cowardice."

"Why do you care?" Bella snaps. "He was a no one, a foreigner-"

"He was a pureblood, on *our* side," Rodolphus repeats. "Did you curse him from behind, Rabastan? While you pretended to be his friend? *Why do I care?*" He sneers, stepping closer to Bella, all threatening.

Bella isn't impressed, but Rabastan gets smaller behind her.

“My brother fucks a married woman, then kills her husband, making a mockery out of our customs, out of our most sacred vows that unite a wizard and witch in matrimony. It disgusts me, that’s why I care. And pray- Rabastan, better pray to all the gods blind enough to still give you their favour after this, that whatever spawn gets out of that whore’s cunt does not look like you. Because if you went ahead and fathered a bastard, shamed my bloodline in that manner, then I will kill you and that whelp, and your fucking whore.”

“You’d have killed a thousand men for Bella,” Rabastan finds the nerve to speak. “A million. Pureblood or-“

“I’d kill the entire world for her, because she is my *wife*. If she’d have wed another, best be sure I wouldn’t have disrespected her, her husband and their families the way you did.”

Bella sighs. “Rodolphus-”

He lifts a hand. “I am warning you, if that child is his, they’re all dead, and no one on this earth will stop me, not even you.” He glares at Bella and then storms out of the room.

“Well, that went alright, considering.”

“Did it?” Sirius asks Bella. “How so?”

She shrugs, turns to Rabastan. “Don’t worry, he’ll …calm down. Eventually. Is the child yours?”

“She says she doesn’t know. He can’t mean that, anyway.” Rabastan looks at Bella for reassurance. “I mean, I don’t doubt he’d off me, but surely he wouldn’t attack Evy or a baby, right?”

Bella doesn’t answer right away. When she does, it’s not exactly an answer. “I’ll calm him down, but I need some time. Best you live in the townhouse for a while, out of his sight. Do not go to Evy, do not appear in public with her,” she warns. “And, with time, Rodolphus will soften.”

“No chance of me getting near Evy right now,” Rabastan says. “I think she, too, will need time to calm down once she hears the news.”

Bella blinks.“You didn’t tell her? You didn’t plan this *with her*?”

Rabastan looks away. “I mentioned the possibility, but she …was not in agreement. Muttered something about Paul not deserving this or some nonsense.”

“You truly are a moron!”

Sirius leaves when Bella starts screaming.

For the first time ever, he understands why his family insists the bride takes an unbreakable vow to be faithful to the husband in their wedding ceremonies. Apparently, it’s to keep things like this from happening.

But Paul and his family are newer blood, less traditional, and they easily agreed not to press for the vow, even if Walden and Evy's father kept telling their future in-laws that they should demand it.

Bella is the first and only woman in their family not to make the vow; well Andromeda didn't, either- but she's not *truly* married. They have papers from some sort of muggle institution and they did something in a church for Ted's family, but that's not a true marriage, is it? Hardly counts. There were no magical bounds. Just some words told to a muggle and a signature in ink on normal muggle paper. Hardly worth anything.

Lily explained to him that it isn't really worth much even for the muggles. That people can 'divorce'- separate legally. Just get up one day and leave their family, and it's apparently done with no consequences.

There is no such thing in their world. Only death dissolves a marriage. Even then, in really old families, like Sirius', death is simply a temporary separation, until the living spouse will join the dead one, eventually.

Sirius' mother is still married to his father, she wears his wedding ring, and took a vow to be his wife alive or dead.

Other families, more modern, do sometimes remarry after the death of a spouse, but certainly the ex spouse has to be *dead*, not just 'divorced'.

"How did Rabastan convince you to allow this?" Sirius asks, when he goes home, to find Voldemort scribbling down a letter.

"He's a loyal man, why not grant him a favour? He never asked for anything before."

"But you pissed off Rodolphus, who is your most loyal man."

Voldemort keeps scribbling, but he smiles. "He's not upset with me. He's enraged with Rabastan and Lucius, possibly even Bella, but not me."

It's true. *'You dragged my lord into this',* Rodolphus said, as if Voldemort had no choice but be complicit, 'dragged' into it by Bella and Rabastan.

But none of the loyal death eaters will ever lay any blame at Voldemort's feet, who can do no wrong in their eyes.

Even in Sirius' eyes.

Voldemort could have prevented it, prohibit Rabastan from acting, yet it is hardly his problem, is it? Besides, everyone knows he bestows favours on those that prove their loyalty.

Though, Sirius isn't sure of Rabastan' loyalty- he's loyal to Rodolphus, he follows Rodolphus, at the core of it, yet the result is the same- Rodolphus is loyal to Voldemort, and thus, so is Rabastan.

(-)

“Did you know? Did you have anything to do with it?” Evy whispers, all dead eyed, when Sirius goes to see her and offer his condolences. The funeral is already over, he didn’t attend, but it is expected of him to offer his condolences, as head of house Black.

“What do you think?” He lifts an eyebrow, challenging.

She examines him for a few seconds, then looks away. “I wouldn’t know; you always helped your friends, no matter how stupid or heinous their actions were.”

“I didn’t know.” Though he wonders, if Rabastan would have told him- truly told him he will murder Paul, not just rant about it incoherently when drunk, if Sirius would have done anything, said anything.

Unlikely, a part of him knows. The part of him that is certain he would slaughter any man or woman that tried to take Voldemort away from him. The part that question how on earth did Rabastan wait *so long* for it, how did he survive the nights, knowing another man was fucking the woman he loved? Sirius wouldn’t have waited for a single night.

Then again, Sirius would have never stood back and allowed for the marriage to happen in the first place.

“I’m not even allowed to be upset about it,” Evy goes on, voice flat. “Bella said it’s my fault, asked what I thought would happen, sleeping with a man like Rabastan, as a married woman.” She shakes her head. “*A man like Rabastan*,” she quotes. “I was thinking that he’s the man, the boy I grew up with. Not- *this*.”

Sirius almost points out that she knows Rabastan is a murderer- he’s a Death Eater, and she must read the newspapers. She knows, but- does she ignore it? Does she imagine half-bloods and muggleborns are fine to kill because they’re not magical enough to count?

Or is it simply because Rabastan, in polite company, minds his manners, smiles wide, is the picture of a gentleman. Like Lucius- well, no one is quite like Lucius, but close enough. Does that make it hard for her to imagine the things Rabastan is capable of?

“Bella is so angry with me,” Evy goes on. “Called me ‘difficult’, asked if I fell in love with Paul, otherwise why care so much?”

She shakes her head, shock and disbelief making a brief appearance on her face. “As if I have to love him to be upset he was murdered. On my behalf. He was a decent man, Sirius, and I got him killed. How do I live with that?”

Sirius doesn’t answer.

“Bella said he wasn’t decent, that he bought me like cattle to improve his status, so basically he deserved to die. That I should be grateful, because now I will be independently rich,

managing the baby's fortune, and I won't need to marry again." She looks so upset. "But Paul didn't consider me a cow, certainly didn't treat me like one."

She bursts into tears, suddenly sobbing, and Sirius doesn't know what to tell her.

He doesn't need to figure it out because her parents show up, and Sirius launches into platitudes about Paul and what a tragedy it is, even if no one there actually gave a shit about the man.

Walden knows the truth; all Death Eaters in the inner circle know it, but Walden isn't there, and he clearly didn't tell his parents, because they both fuss over Evy, offering her tea, petting her head.

"She hasn't eaten anything since it happened," Mrs Macnair complains.

"You must eat, Evelyn. For the baby," Mr Macnair insists, because that baby is their future.

Unless he comes out with red hair and green eyes. Then, that baby will be their eternal shame.

(-)

Patient Lucius, cautious Lucius, 'things take time' Lucius is now starting to ask Voldemort when exactly the war will end.

"We're ready," he said, once. *"There's no opposition to speak off. We can take the country in a week."*

Voldemort deflects, and Lucius doesn't insist too much, but it's clear as day how much his priorities shifted, how his patience runs thin where Draco and Draco's safety is concerned.

Sirius is on his side; he understands. None of them have clean hands in that circle, but Lucius is a good man, better than most, at least by Sirius' standards. And they want the same thing- for the war to end, and end quickly.

Sirius backs him up, fully, in all the meetings. He orders his grandfather to vote with Lucius in the Wizengamot, no matter what.

"Lucius and I are already in agreement in most matters," his grandfather told him. *"Well, Abraxas and I, but it's the same thing at the end of the day."*

Still, no matter how tired and harassed Lucius looks these days, he knows he's on the winning side. He just wants the war done already so he can be home with Draco more, so his son won't have to grow up seeing horrible shit in the paper every morning.

Nothing like James and Lily, who by now fully realise, like the rest of the country, that the war is lost. *Stressed* is not enough to describe how they look.

Sirius would love to reassure them, to tell them he will take care of them, there's no need to worry so much. He won't let anyone hurt them. But he can't say that, of course. Well, he *does* say it, but they think it's just empty promises they offer each other; they don't understand Sirius actually has the power to protect them.

It got so serious that James took Sirius to the Ministry and registered Sirius as Harry's Guardian. They lied and said the ritual was done; Peter lied to, their 'witness'.

Not like anyone will ever check, really. No one would believe Lily refused Sirius' blood and protection. It's insane, people would give an arm for an honour of that magnitude, so it is highly unlikely anyone will question Sirius' and James' claims.

Sirius' grandfather was not pleased when he heard, neither were his mother and brother.

Yet they stopped referring to Harry as 'that filthy half-blood' as soon as Arcturus saw the registry at the Ministry.

Half-blood or not, they think the ritual was done, and there is no taking that back. It is a sacred vow, never taken lightly, so they have no choice but to accept it, even if they are unhappy.

Voldemort is the only one beside Peter to know Harry isn't truly Sirius' charge, not magically.

"She'll never integrate," he tells Sirius, when Sirius rants about Lily and her stubborn muggle sensibilities. "She refuses to adapt and you will always have problems with her."

"She just needs more time," Sirius argues.

"She's been in our world for ten years."

"Yes, but seven of those were at Hogwarts! And the last year and a half she was shut indoors, either pregnant or with a baby at her breast," Sirius defends her. "And the other year was spent fighting for her life, so, really- she didn't have enough time. She'll adapt, she'll understand we do things…in a certain way."

Voldemort watches him carefully. "You have to let them go, Sirius."

It sends shivers down his spine.

"No. James is my-"

"Her husband. James is *her* husband. He will follow her, not you. He already abandoned his heritage, his customs for her."

"Listen, they'll come around, it's just adjusting. And the war doesn't make it easy-"

“Do you really think, when the war is done and you won’t be able to pretend you’re not on my side anymore, that she will forgive you? That he will?”

Sirius bites his lip. “I’ll find a way to- I- I’ll say something about my family or I don’t know. They won’t know I fought with you! I’ll just tell them that now the war is done, I’m simply going to …move on. Accept it.”

“Move on? She *can’t* move on. She’s a mudblood. How are you going to advise her to ‘move on’?”

“No one will hurt her,” Sirius growls.

“You can offer her that protection, you can make sure she’s not killed or persecuted, but she won’t move on. She’ll never feel safe, she’ll have to stay out of sight, out of mind. So will James, for that matter.”

“He’s a pureblood with an old name-”

“He’s a blood traitor. He’ll be shunned. They most likely will choose to live on the muggle side.”

Sirius makes a face. “No, never. James would never adapt there.”

“They’ll leave the country, then. You’ll lose them. One way or another. Best if you focus on Draco, give him your attention and care. He’s your blood, your family. He belongs here.”

But Sirius won’t let them go.

Perhaps- perhaps leaving the country won’t be so bad. France or Spain. Sirius could visit weekly, and yeah- Lily can live there comfortably, or as comfortable as any muggleborn can ever be in a wizarding world. At least there’s no war there.

Yeah, they should leave. They can’t right then, the borders had closed. No entry, no departure. The people hate the Ministry for it, but his grandfather says that if they didn’t close the border, more than half their citizen would have fled. Already, before they closed it, close to twelve percent of their population went abroad. And it wasn’t all muggleborns. No, at least a quarter were either purebloods, or half-bloods.

Lucius said the border will stay closed after the war, too, until people settle, until order is established, otherwise people would still flee.

But Sirius will be able to get James and Lily out. He can’t ask the current Minister to make an exception for the Potters, as a favour to Sirius. But he can ask that of Voldemort.

(-)

“You have to end it,” he tells Voldemort, one night. “Just- *enough*. It’s done. It’s practically done. Take over and end it.”

Diagon Alley is mostly closed down. No one smiles anymore, everyone rushed. People barely leave their house and when they do, they watch everyone with suspicion.

Knockturn is thriving, more and more daring with its law breaking, selling dark artefacts, prohibited artefacts openly on the streets, because the Aurors don’t have enough time or men to deal with them.

The Ministry is weak, and Dumbledore’s Order is half dead, half in hiding.

It’s scary how fast Voldemort moved, when he finally wanted to.

The war dragged on, and on, for ten years, with life carrying on as normal, and then, in a few short months, everything changed.

Even people that used to oppose Voldemort fiercely, normal citizens, half-bloods some of them, just want him to win already, because the stress, the tension is too *unbearable*. They rather have it done, learn what is in store for them and try to live their lives, because no one is living right now.

Well- some are.

High end pubs and restaurants, filled with members of the Twenty Eight, and other old, rich pureblooded families. Business as usual there.

An arrest warrant was signed for Rodolphus, by the Minister herself, on the night of the ambush. They were sure they were going to get Rodolphus.

They didn’t, but Lucius got a hold of the arrest warrant, had it plastered all over Diagon and Knockturn and their hospital and magical villages, including Hogsmeade; for the people to see that the Minister issued the warrant, yet *no one* can arrest Rodolphus.

Sirius’ grandfather and many others from the Wizengamot press for a vote of no confidence, because the Minister didn’t consult them before signing the warrant.

It isn’t lawful, apparently. “Stab in the back,” his grandfather declares, interviewed by the Daily Prophet. “The Minister claims the dark lord would be a tyrant, and yet she’s acting the tyrant already, not upholding our laws.”

Rodolphus doesn’t show up much in public. He makes brief appearances to some of their select pubs, enough to be seen, surrounded by his own men, in public places where an Auror force is anxious to trespass.

So few Aurors remain, and they don’t wish to throw them away against the fortress that is Lestrange Manor, where Voldemort is rumoured to live, and lose all the soldiers they have left.

The Aurors these days mostly guard the Minister, some Department Heads and the Ministry itself, expecting a full on attack on the institution.

What remains of the Hit Wizards patrol daily, but they don't dare going to Knockturn. Even so, sometimes accidents happen to them, and they get picked up one by one.

"You won," Sirius says, head propped on his hand, in bed, his other hand tracing runes on Voldemort's chest. "Just claim it. It's horrible out there. I don't like it."

No matter how much Voldemort insists Sirius is apathetic to these matters…he might be, but it's not pleasant to live in such atmosphere.

He hates how awful Lily looks, James almost as bad, waiting with dread for the final blow, huddled in Godric's Hollow, with their kid and newly adopted cat.

"Please take care of her, too," Lily said once, when James was away in the bedroom, changing Harry. *"When-if we don't make it, take care of Harry and Whiskers."*

It gutted Sirius. He sat beside her, hugged her tightly, promised her nothing will happen to her, but she had a desperate look in her eyes, and she kept trying to make him swear he'll take care of Harry and the cat.

Peter flat out refuses to go out in public. He begs Sirius to come with them when he takes his mother to the hospital, for her appointments, and that's that. Sirius even buys him his groceries, because Peter made it very clear he isn't leaving his house anymore. At best, he comes with Sirius to visit James and Lily, but even inside their home, he sticks so close to Sirius, he's almost like a child clinging to his father.

Sirius thought, many times, that he'll have to pull his name, to intimidate Healers into treating Mrs Pettigrew when they go for her weekly appointments, because there are less Healers than ever available- some dead, some fled, some hidden in their houses. Nurses, too. Incredibly short staffed, and patients overflowing. Some from curses, yes, but not necessarily from Death Eaters or criminals; many civilians are simply cursing *each other* on the street, driven by paranoia that the other is a Death Eater or a thief.

Some people are just there begging for something, a potion, *anything* to help them sleep.

He thought Mrs Pettigrew would have issues getting her treatment in these conditions, but to his surprise, she always goes in on time, and the Healer is just as patient with her as he always was, even if he looks harassed and snaps at the few nurses he has left when the appointment is done.

Remus is almost impossible to get ahold of, James tells him. Peter stopped trying, what with his fear of public places, but James tries to keep in contact, though it's not easy.

Lily grows extremely suspicious. Of Remus, of *everything*. Sometimes Sirius thinks she's looking at him oddly, too, but that can't be.

"No one likes it," Sirius goes on.

“I bet.” Voldemort smirks.

“I mean other Death Eaters, too,” Sirius clarifies. “Lucius. Yaxley. Parkinson. Rowle- the international trade stagnated…they’re losing patience,” Sirius warns him. *They’re losing money.*

Only the most sadistic Death Eaters seem to enjoy the horror and fear; the *no-ones*, the scum that never got the chance to lord it over other purebloods, their blood too new, or their vaults too empty. They’re taking advantage now, thinking they own the streets, while the rich purebloods are busy worrying about gold, and the rest of the country worries if they’ll survive another day.

Narcissa is getting increasingly upset she can’t go to Paris to buy clothes. Some other important wives are making noise, complaining about the lack of certain imported goods. Even Bella mourns the loss of her favourite Italian perfume, though she is insistent that it’s not important, that she can live without, if it is needed.

Werewolves are growing bolder, gangs of them coming out of the woods, stealing food, knowing Aurors won’t bother coming out just for food.

Vampires come out at night, prowling magical villages and Knockturn Alley.

Last Sirius saw them, they were all bursting with health, cheeks so red, one wouldn’t be able to guess they’re dead.

Dementors are eating well, too, Sirius learns. Rodolphus is in charge of feeding the beast and making the most out of ‘resources’. The Aurors or Hit Wizards they capture are first given in secret for Dementors to feed on, at Lestrange Manor, then their soulless carcasses are handed over to the vampires, for Voldemort’s ‘no waste policy’.

Almost half of their remaining population has moved to Hogsmeade, to be closer to Dumbledore. But Hogsmeade can’t house so many people.

And Hogwarts doesn’t open its gates. It makes sense to Sirius why Dumbledore wouldn’t. Hogwarts is safe, the only truly safe place left, and it houses hundreds of students. Dumbledore can’t take in another few hundred people, not when any of them could be a Death Eater, or a Death Eater spy, or just a madman that has reached his limit.

Sirius understands, the Ministry certainly understands, but the population grows resentful.

“Where is Dumbledore? Why isn’t he doing anything? Why isn’t he helping us?”

Voldemort says it was the same when Grindelwald was winning, back in the day, only back then an entire continent was screeching for Dumbledore to come and save them.

But if Dumbledore leaves Hogwarts this time, if he searches for Voldemort, he might not return from such an encounter. More importantly, Sirius guesses, if Dumbledore leaves Hogwarts, Hogwarts would fall rather quickly in his absence. To Death Eaters, to Voldemort, or simply to the hungry, desperate crowds gathered in Hogsmeade.

The Prophet was never very reliable as a news source, but now it's less reliable than ever. After a few journalists *disappeared*, they suddenly don't feel inclined to report the news much, to say anything bad about Death Eaters or, gods forbid, even mention 'You-Know-Who'.

Sirius asked for Rita to be left alone. He had to ask this of Yaxley, who's apparently in charge of keeping the press in check.

"Skeeter?"

"Yeah."

Yaxley's eyebrow shoots up into his hairline. "Wasn't she the one that wrote every possible unflattering article about you last year?"

Sirius sighs. "We had a horrible breakup. She scratched my bike, so I stole her armchair that apparently once belonged to her beloved Nana."

Yaxley laughs. "But you still want her safe, after all that. How chivalrous of you." He looks through some parchments. "Let's see. Skeeter, S…there she is." He reads something, then puts the parchment away. "You shouldn't have bothered. The woman isn't dumb, she stopped reporting on actual news ages ago, only deals with gossip. We didn't even have to threaten or pay her for it."

Rita was so terrified of Voldemort, her Boggart turned into him, Sirius remembers.

Rita was Sirius' first actual relationship, though *very* short. She was the first to stand up to Sirius, to win an argument against him, her tongue sharp, her witty words fast and convincing.

Sirius liked her, she was beautiful, more mature than all the girls he slept with at Hogwarts, than the muggle girls he got the chance to fuck immediately after he left Hogwarts. Rita was smart, well-read, her robes well made, her hair and nails always styled. She had her shit together, she had a house, and for Sirius that just got out of Hogwarts, it was quite impressive. He liked that she was as a pureblooded woman should be: well maintained, beautiful, stylish, yet she also *worked*, she bought her own shit, she supported herself. But Sirius didn't know how to deal with her, with how unbendable she was, never taking shit from him. He was shocked when she got so angry that he cheated on her, to the point that she slapped him, and then scratched his bike. He was surprised a pureblood woman, one of his own, would not look the other way, would not accept a Black does what he wants.

"You like 'em older, don't you?" Yaxley teases, no doubt another stupid innuendo about him and Voldemort.

"She's not that old," Sirius protests. "She's only a year older than Bella."

"She is quite attractive," Yaxley muses, pulling a picture out of a stack of them. All journalists, with their addresses written on the back. And other information like: "Pureblood,

Slytherin," he reads, and then he looks back at Sirius. "So you're done with her, right? Maybe I'll ask her out."

Sirius snorts. "She'll eat you alive, Yaxley. Trust me, you don't need that headache in your life."

Yaxley is already married, and he is a bit older than Rita, who likes her boys younger.

He needs to talk to Greyback about Remus, because obviously he's in charge of the werewolves. So Sirius goes to his forest, unhappy.

"You're to leave him alone," Sirius tells him. "Voldemort himself ordered it."

"The dark lord," Greyback corrects him with a smirk.

Not you, too!

So many Death Eaters correct him, when Sirius says Voldemort, instead of the dark lord. But Greyback isn't even a Death Eater, for Merlin's sake.

"I can smell him all over you, Black," Greyback goes on.

"Want me to curse your nose off, so you won't be able to smell anything ever again?"

Greyback, though usually up for a fight, *infamous* for it, actually, backs down. Sirius is under no illusion it's because of him, but exactly because Greyback knows Sirius is fucking Voldemort.

"Your pathetic excuse of a wolf will be unbothered," Greyback assures him. "I don't know why you bothered to come, didn't the dark lord tell you he already ordered this, many moons ago?"

He hadn't. Sirius feels warmth sweep into his heart, and also annoyance because he made this trip for nothing.

Peter, Lily and James stay inside their houses and they don't belong to any category that is firmly under a Death Eater.

There's no Blood Traitor or Muggleborn department, or anything as ridiculous as that, thank the gods.

"People don't have where to buy food anymore. They're having to go to muggle stores, and they keep exchanging galleons to an unprecedented degree. The goblins are making noise that they won't allow it anymore," Sirius complains.

"I'll deal with the goblins, soon enough." Voldemort stares at the ceiling, lost in thought.

"When?"

Voldemort sighs, searches for Sirius' hand in bed. He finds it, gives it a gentle squeeze. "There's one last thing to take care of. And then it will be over."

"Alright, take care of it, then."

Voldemort keeps staring at the ceiling. "You won't like it."

"I don't like any of this."

Voldemort nods after some seconds. "We all need to sacrifice," he says. "You understand that. You agree to it?"

Doesn't seem like Voldemort is sacrificing anything, but Sirius doesn't point it out.

Voldemort sacrificed enough; his youth, so he could learn. His body, so he could withstand using so much dark magic. His soul.

His name.

Voldemort gave everything, more than anyone else, to become who he is.

"What is it, anyway? What is left to do? Dumbledore?"

"Two things, then," Voldemort rectifies. "Dumbledore, yes, but he will be dealt with *after* the Ministry falls. Before that, there's only one problem to solve, to ensure I will never be defeated."

"You won't."

Who would defeat Voldemort? Ridiculous. If Dumbledore can't do it, no one else can.

"Have you decided on what happens to the Ministry, after it falls? Will you become Minister?"

"Who is asking? You, or Lucius?" Voldemort turns to him, finally, with a sneer. "Perhaps your grandfather-"

"I am asking."

Though, yeah, Lucius has been asking as well. '*We need to know what he plans to do'*.

Voldemort doesn't answer, and once again, Sirius wonders if he ever had a fucking plan to begin with, if there's a goal in mind here, besides power. If he ever considered what he wants to do with that power, outside of waving it in front of all the people that wronged him in his youth.

It was never clear to him why Voldemort did all this, why he started the war.

Sometimes he thinks he only did it to spite Dumbledore.

“This is my world,” Sirius says, carefully. “I know you care nothing for it, but I do. I care what happens after. Do you find that hard to believe? You have to ask if Lucius put me up to it-”

“I know you care. You care about your family. You care about what position the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black will have in a world ruled by me.”

Sirius shrugs. “Yeah.”

Voldemort sighs. “What do you want? What outcome would please you?”

Sirius rests his head on Voldemort’s shoulder. “I just don’t want everything destroyed. I want things as they were. As I know them. Keep it as it was, only with you in charge. Well, obviously, it will be better, you’re more competent than all the politicians in the world put together, but mainly …it wasn’t *that* bad. Before the war, I mean. For me. It was nice.”

He realises how stupid he sounds as he speaks, but Voldemort asked him what he wants, and that’s what he wants.

He never claimed he’s in it to change the word or anything. He just wants his family and the few friends he has to be safe. He wants the world he’s most comfortable navigating.

“I want us to be able to go out in public,” he goes on. “I would prefer it if I don’t see people murdered on the streets all the times just because they are muggleborns. And that’s pretty much it.”

“Very well,” Voldemort says, and Sirius raises his head to stare at him.

“What does that mean?”

“What it implies. You’ll have what you want.”

Sirius blinks at him. He knows he’s a good fuck, but still-

“Are you serious?”

“It will be as it was,” Voldemort declares, completely uninterested. “I can’t do that, however. If I take charge personally, it will not be ‘as it was’. Luckily for you, I am not very interested in ruling a country.”

“You- *what*?”

“I never was,” he says. “If I wanted to be a politician, I’d have become one and I have no doubt I’d be Minister by now. Ministers don’t have real power, in any case. That is shared between the Sacred Families.”

“I know.”

That’s why he’s worried. That’s why Lucius is worried. Once the war is done, and they get rid of ‘traitors’ and Dumbledore and whatever else they hated in the Ministry, It will just be

Voldemort and the Sacred Families, both wanting power.

“So, what will you do?”

“Something I never did before.” He holds Sirius gaze. “Compromise. I’ll let go of some things I had planned for this conutry, so you can have your silly world back, your beautiful manors and glamorous parties. And, one day, you will remember it, and repay the favour. You will compromise, too.”

(-)

The table is round, and it’s no coincidence. Sirius bets it was his grandfather’s idea; he just knows it was. There will be no head of table here, no seat of authority that Voldemort could take.

Rodolphus makes a noise when he sees it, but Voldemort doesn’t react.

Lucius is already seated beside his father, but he stands when they enter.

Everyone stands. Almost all members of the inherited seats of the Wizengamot are there, some with their heirs.

Crouch is missing, so are Prewett, Slughorn, Longbottom and Shacklebolt.

Even Macmillan is there, proud Hufflepuff, and, from what Sirius knows, a man that opposes Voldemort and generally isn’t too staunch on blood purity. But he has a good relationship with the Blacks, because they’re not so distant family. Sirius’ grandmother had been half Macmillan, and he can remember her dragging him to visit that side of her family often, or they coming around to visit in return. Grandmother Melania has been dead for a while, but Arcturus kept in close contact with that family, even after his wife passed away.

‘But how can Mr Macmillian be your grandfather?’ a five-year-old Sirius asked his father, confused.

All Sirius’ grandparents were Blacks, yet his father had one that was a Macmillan, and Sirius couldn’t understand it.

His father laughed. *“Enrik is my mother’s father, Sirius. Her mother was, indeed, a Black, one of us, but she married Enrik. That makes him my grandfather.”*

“But he’s not a Black,” Sirius kept saying.

“He’s a good man, regardless.”

He was. He gave Sirius loads of toys, and unlike grandfather Arcturus or grandfather Pollux, he never chided Sirius about his behaviour, let Sirius run around his house, and play with

whatever he wanted, without reminding him not to break ancient, precious artefacts.

Enrik died when Sirius was eleven, and the current Mr Macmillan looks even softer.

His grandfather isn't there yet. Sirius is far too familiar with the man's pride, with his games, and he does not want him to do this to Voldemort.

Alas, there's no avoiding it. He still considers this a win, that he made his grandfather agree to meeting Voldemort, hear him out, finally abandon his neutrality.

They sit, Sirius at Voldemort's left, Rodolphus at his right.

It's odd.

Half of the men there aren't Death Eaters- but half are, yet they're also Wizengamot members. It feels like two sides, mixed, yet also separate.

It feels tense.

Once Voldemort sits, the others resume their seats, too.

Macmillan watches Voldemort with distaste; so does Greengrass. Abbot sneers. Yet still, someone- most likely Sirius' grandfather and Abraxas- judged they can be here. That despite their opinion on Voldemort, they can be trusted to choose the winning side.

It's odd; in this company, Voldemort becomes someone else. He's not the god-like leader he is in Death Eater meetings, he's not pure terror and magic like he is when he duels his enemies.

He's not Sirius' Voldemort, gentle and considerate.

There is something monstrous in his shadow when it trails behind him. He takes up more space than he usually does.

In this company, Voldemort is a warlord. Some of the men seated there bear his mark and obey him, some support his cause, some dislike him but have come to listen, to end the war.

And whose side are you on? Sirius asks. He's looking at Lucius, seated next to his father. *Who will you serve, in the end? Voldemort or your dad?*

He is looking at Lucius, but the question is not solely aimed at him.

That's when his grandfather enters.

It's one of those moments, when everyone looks, where time stops, for just one second, because a Black had just arrived and one can't help but take notice.

And there they go; everyone stands once more.

People stand when Arcturus Black enters a room, even if it's a room Voldemort already inhabits.

Macmillan and Abbot don't sneer at him. Greengrass nods in respect.

Voldemort doesn't stand.

His grandfather stops to shake a few hands, says a few words to Abraxas and Mr Rosier, before passing by Sirius.

"Tie your hair; for a second, I mistook you for Bellatrix."

Oh, it's worse than I thought. He'd expected hostility, he'd expected his grandfather will use anything to establish authority, but he's even meaner than Sirius prepared himself for.

"Are you competing with Lucius over who is the prettiest girl, with the shiniest hair?" he asks, eyeing Sirius' hair with distaste

Abraxas hides a smirk.

Lucius, as always, gives no reaction. Sirius would kill to be this unbothered over insults.

"Yes," Sirius says. "Am I winning?"

"When one plays stupid games, one wins stupid prizes," his grandfather answers and finally, he looks at Voldemort. "Oh, there you are. I didn't spot you in this awful lighting. These are some gaudy, useless candle holders, Abraxas, you should replace them. Good evening, Lord Voldemort."

"Good evening," Voldemort says. "I wouldn't blame the candle holders. Poor eyesight is a common issue in the elderly, I hear. Might want your eyes checked, Mr Black."

"Why would I? I find poor vision is preferable these days, considering what's going on in the world."

Lucius looks between them as if he's watching a quidditch match, where a quaffle is being passed from one Chaser to another.

In fact, the entire table is watching on in interest, except Rodolphus, who looks *done* with it all. This is very familiar to him, after all. He goes through this shit ay every family reunion, insulted and looked down at by every Black in his vicinity.

His grandfather takes a seat between Abraxas and Macmillan. "I must say, I welcome it. It spares me of unpleasant sights. Mudbloods and half-bloods everywhere in our ministry and houses. It is a pity my other senses remain as sharp as always." He taps a finger on his nose. "I can smell filth from a mile away."

"I dare say you shall be spared of that, too, once you stop breathing." Voldemort's tone is flat, but his eyes are burning.

This is why you will never be one of us, Sirius thinks, as half the men around the table go rigid.

One doesn't threaten, however vaguely, a Black. In public, no less.

But Voldemort doesn't care about that, never had.

Gods, how does he feel, as a half-blood, raised by muggles, surrounded by not only purebloods, but the richest, most arrogant purebloods in the country.

Voldemort is so obviously *other*, sitting there amongst them.

"I can only hope," his grandfather answers pleasantly. "However, I'm unlikely to die while dirt besmirches my house. And, mind you, Britain is my home. I shan't rest until that filthy, up jumped, worthless half-blood is gone." He lets the insult simmer for a couple of seconds, before adding. "I mean Dumbledore, of course. Should go without saying, but as I lamented earlier, these days there are half-bloods everywhere, so one needs to be specific."

He smiles at Voldemort. Voldemort glares back.

Abraxas coughs. "Now that we're all here, I think we can begin."

"Indeed," Arcturus says. "Lord Voldemort, you asked for a meeting. Do tell us what's about. Some of us are old, as you astutely pointed out. It would be cruel to keep us in suspense."

"If you'd shut up for a second," Sirius barks at him, giving him a warning glare. "Maybe he would."

This is for our benefit, you old bastard. For your benefit. And you sit there and antagonise him. He could have burned all our Manors to the ground, yet he's sat here, willing to compromise.

"Your hair, Sirius. Tie it back."

Sirius does, hoping it will appease his grandfather. He knew snapping at him will make the old man pick on him, instead of Voldemort.

Somehow, this upsets Voldemort more than when he was the one being insulted. A muscle twitches in his jaw, and he grows more annoyed when Sirius complies, gathering his hair and tying it at his nape.

At least his grandfather shuts up; an uncomfortable silence falls over the room, all eyes on Voldemort.

"The war has come to an end," Voldemort finally says. "You should prepare yourselves. I know your ways, how *long* it takes you to reach decisions, so I am warning you in advance."

All Death Eaters present knew about this, more or less. Surprise blooms on Macmillan's face. Abbot and Greengrass are equally surprised, but relief shines in their eyes.

“When?” Greengrass asks.

“In November. I will kill Minister Bagnold, deal with the remaining Auror force. You should be ready to take control over the ministry.”

“Kill?” His grandfather hums, his fingers tapping on the table. “In my humble opinion, arresting her for treason would be more prudent. If she is murdered, the International Confederation might ask some questions, and it would be for the best if they don’t get involved.”

“Are you afraid of the Confederation, Mr Black?” Voldemort drawls.

“I am aware it would be an inconvenience to have them swooping down on us.”

Voldemort smiles, his terrifying smile. “They won’t dare. They are spread thin, their main focus still on Austria, guarding Grindelwald, still spread around Germany and France. Grindelwald is still alive and they fear if they leave to come here, some of his old supporters might grow bold again.”

Two of Grindelwald's old supporters are in that room; old Mr Rowle and old Mr Travers.

Mr Rosier’s aunt has been one of Grindelwald’s most loyal, died quite spectacularly when she attempted to break Grindelwald out of Nurmengard.

And, of course, Sirius’ grandfather, though, like with Voldemort, the Blacks kept their support to a minimum, deciding to hold back and wait for a decisive victory.

“Even so, they will ask questions. They dislike violent takeovers, as you know. If we pretend to follow a due process-”

“Let them come, if that is what they decide. You see, Mr Black, I am not afraid of them.”

“Oh, your reputation in battle is impressive, Lord Voldemort.”

What’s *impressive* is how his grandfather insists on saying Voldemort’s full title. How insulting it sounds, coming out of his mouth.

It is a feared name that strikes dread into people. A name to be whispered in dark rooms.

And yet his grandfather spat it thrice in just as many minutes, and it does take away from its frightening reputation.

“I have no doubt you would best any invading force. However, it is not all about war. If we seem tyrannical, if we deviate too far from acceptable ways of taking the Ministry, then the Confederation, even if they would avoid confronting you, will impose sanctions on us. We shall be cut off from trade, and that is the sort of battle even your legendary power cannot win.”

“If we follow due process,” Abraxas intervenes, “if you truly want to appease the International Confederation, Arcturus, that means we have to allow a full Wizengamont vote,

to elect a new Minister. We don't have full control of the other half of the Wizengamot. And, right now, Crouch is the favourite- if we vote, he will win. And we'd end up where we started- even *worse*. Crouch is far more competent that the wench we have masquerading as a Minister."

"Come now, Abraxas, you got rid of that- what was his name? That filthy mudblood that took office- Nobby Leach? Oh, Lord Voldemort, you should have seen it! My son, Orion, together with Abraxas got rid of that abomination swiftly, and there was no need for war or bloodshed."

Ah, so that was his name. Leach.

"We can get rid of Crouch, diplomatically," Sirius' grandfather says. "If we leak the rumour his son is a Death Eater, the mudblood loving fools won't vote for him; we can push Fudge forward for the position. We can easily control Fudge."

"Do as you please," Voldemort says. "I shall deliver Bagnold to you, and you can squabble amongst yourselves. However-" he pauses, his voice comes softer, yet harder, somehow, when he speaks after a second. "You won't use Barty Jr for your plots. He is under my protection."

It is a proof of his power, that he's telling these proud men they aren't allowed to do something, and no one protests, not even Arcturus Black.

"And you?" Macmillan asks Voldemort. "What will your…role be, if you do not wish to be Minister?"

"Indeed." Sirius' grandfather raises an eyebrow. "While we all participated, this is your victory, Lord Voldemort. What would be your spoils?"

Sirius really wishes his grandfather would stop with the 'Lord Voldemort'. It's getting really, *really* grating.

"Some participated more than others," Voldemort drawls, his gaze going over Macmilian, Abbot, Greengrass, and finally stopping on Sirius' grandfather.

"Ah, depends what you count as participation, Lord Voldemort."

"You should ask those that bled in this war, those that sacrificed their lives for it. Or, at least, those that contributed financially. I don't recall you doing either, Mr Black."

For the first time, Sirius' grandfather's face hardness, no more pretence, no more playing an old, slightly obnoxious man. "Lord Voldemort, perhaps you are unable to comprehend it, giving your lack of familial ties, but while some of us are too old to have fought ourselves- *our* sons, *our* nephews, *our* grandsons fought. They bled. And if one of us bleeds, all of us do, because they carry our blood in their veins. We all participated, make no mistake about it. Your loyal army only exists because of old men like me that gave your soldiers life."

“Quite well said,” Mr Rosier agrees. He would. His eyes look dead- they’ve been that way since Evan left them.

Voldemort grows angry now; his magic, well suppressed so far, starts manifesting around him; invisible, but *tangible*.

“However,” his grandfather continues, perhaps aware he crossed some dangerous line, and now he’s back to smiling, to playing the old man. “No one denies you are the one that is most deserving of rewards, Lord Voldemort. We all recognise it, and it is only fair you are the first to take your pick of the spoils. So name it, and we shall - *plot*, you said?- around it.”

Voldemort glares, in silence. Sirius would like to touch him, to silently apologise for his arsehole of a grandfather, to remind Voldemort that he’s doing this for Sirius, and that Sirius will make sure to reward him for it. That they have an exciting life waiting for them.

But there’s no tablecloth, no privacy, so Sirius doesn’t touch him. He plays with the Horcrux, instead, hidden under his robe.

“If you’ll accept suggestions, you should take your place in the Wizengamot,” his grandfather says. “We can rule this country together.”

“How will your nose handle my presence there?” Voldemort asks. “Your old heart might just give out, having to be in proximity to *filth* so often.”

Oh, yeah. Voldemort is not delusional at all, clearly. He knows everyone in that room knows who he is. These are not his run of the mill Death Eaters, after all.

His grandfather gives him an apprising look, calculating. “You are Slytherin’s Heir. You are a Gaunt. You proved yourself a reasonable man, asking for this meeting, offering an olive branch. Exceptions can be made, for extraordinary wizards. My nose and heart will be just fine, though I must thank you for your concern.”

Sirius promised Voldemort his grandfather will accept him, will finally join him. Sirius ordered it, after all. And, as obnoxious as he is, Arcturus is a dutiful man, always has been. If his head of house asks something, he will do it.

Sirius asked him to support Voldemort, and promised in return Voldemort won’t destroy their way of life.

His grandfather is trying, he really is, if he’s offering Voldemort should take the Gaunt seat, sit in that ancient institution, as an *equal*, as a member of the Sacred Twenty Eight.

“I would make for a marvellous dictator,” Voldemort says. “But I am no politician. I leave that boring affair to those that enjoy it. My time is best spent elsewhere. I have no desire to squabble over laws, even with *esteemed* members of the Twenty-Eight.”

“So you will do…what, exactly?” Greengrass asks.

“If you want to appease the Confederation, it is best I remain in the shadows. With *my* army. Mind you, after the Aurors are done, mine shall be the *only* army around here, until such a

time you train new Aurors. I am willing to serve as a deterrent for any country or entity that would make the mistake of thinking Britain is an easy target during this political turmoil." He leans back into his chair, his magic retreats inside him. "As for the Wizengamot, I have no need to occupy a seat myself. My trusted friends make up for half of it." He looks at Sirius, at Rodolphus, at Parkinson, Avery, Rowle, Nott, Yaxley and, finally, Lucius. He holds Lucius' gaze the longest. "I am satisfied that my desires shall be represented there, given due consideration."

"You are most gracious, Lord Voldemort," Sirius' grandfather says, and he only sounds a *bit* mocking.

"A desirable outcome, one that satisfies us all, I trust," Abraxas says.

"Perhaps we should confer," Macmillan suggests. "Amongst ourselves."

Ourselves clearly doesn't include Voldemort.

"No need," Rodolphus barks. "If you want a vote, I assure you, we will vote in favour. Sirius- and I want you all to remember that *Sirius* holds the Black vote, even if he allows his grandfather to use it for now- myself, Avery, Parkinson, Lucius- or Abraxas, makes no difference- Bulstrode, Carrow, Fawley, Flint, Nott, Rowle, Selwyn, Travers, Yaxley and Rosier-if he remembers what his *son* died for-" he gives Mr Rosier a pointed look, "we are all in favour. So spare me, Macmillan. You will do as you are told." He glares at Abbot, too.

Indeed, all the men Rodolphus mentioned, either Death Eaters or fathers of Death Eaters, nod in agreement.

"Very well," Macmillan agrees. Greengrass nods his acceptance as well, and Abbot has no choice but to do the same.

"We still have one problem," Sirius' grandfather says. "Dumbledore."

"His order is half dead, the rest in hiding. He is one lonely man," Rodolphus spits. "Even the elected side of the Wizengamot has distanced themselves from him."

"Yes, when we take over, we will issue an arrest warrant for him," Lucius says.

"And? If he refuses to leave Hogwarts?" Sirius' grandfather asks. "Who will go for him? As you pointed out, we will be rather…short on Aurors. And it must be said, most Aurors wouldn't be able to apprehend that pest. We can certainly judge him for many thing, but his magical skill is quite….unparalleled." He looks to Voldemort.

"He's not a problem," Voldemort says, softly.

"Perhaps you can defeat him in a duel, certainly all I heard about your might points towards it, but I must say, I am quite…uncomfortable with the idea of anyone laying siege to Hogwarts. We all have relatives there, you see, Lord Voldemort. Our children. Our future. So-"

“There won’t be any need for a siege. He will flee. He, too, cares about the students,” Voldemort says. “He won’t risk having me at his gates. He’s well aware a duel between us will endanger everyone close enough to witness it. He will flee, I guarantee it.”

“Isn’t that a problem?” old Travers asks. Young Travers glares at his father. Young Travers, Bella’s age, is as fanatical about Voldemort as his father had been about Grindelwald. “If he remains at large, he could gather new men, in another country. He has friends in the International Confederation and in-”

“Leave him to me. Dumbledore is my concern, not yours. No need to trouble your noble heads about it. This is a matter between two half-bloods, is it not? Two equals in magic and power. Best not interfere, you’re severely unequipped to even ponder over it.”

Ouch. That stings.

It stings Sirius, too, not only the rest.

He’ll never respect me the way he respects Dumbledore. He’ll never respect anyone but the old Headmaster.

Voldemort stands. “This concludes our meeting. Oh-” he says, as if he forgot. As if Voldemort forgets anything, as if he doesn’t know what he’ll say, what he plans to say, and when. “I do have two requests, for the new laws you shall pass, when all your political rivals shall be dead or arrested or fled. You will make some amendments to inheritance laws. You pride yourself on your pure blood, and yet you’d rather let your bloodlines die out, instead of allowing a woman to inherit your names and a seat in the Wizengamot. I find that absurd. So, I *recommend* you fix it.”

From everything he said so far, this outrages everyone at the table the most.

Besides Lucius and Rodolphus.

“Did you not suggest I should take my place in the Wizengamot, Mr Black? My seat? Well, it wouldn’t be my seat, would it? According to your current laws, it can only pass from a father to a son. My uncle died without a son. It is only through my mother, that I would have been able to claim it. I would only be able to call myself a Gaunt, through her. So, it appears you already spotted this…problem with your inheritance laws, Mr Black.”

This is for Bella, Sirius knows. He promised her he will make things better, and he is keeping his word.

In that moment, Sirius loves him more than ever.

Before anyone can start disagreeing, Voldemort goes on.

“And I shall require a vast forest, and funding, for Greyback’s pack to build a safe community there. I want them to have a place of their own; I want for them to have the freedom to walk into our word, undisturbed, when they are in need of medical help, or other resources.”

“Now, *that*-” Selwyn starts to say.

“That is nonnegotiable,” Voldemort declares. “I warned you I don’t make for a good politician, did I not? I do *not* negotiate. Do whatever else you want, consider yourselves lucky I do not care, but on these two issues, I will not back down. Good day.”

He walks out of the room, unhurried.

“Women? In the Wizengamot?” Old Travers looks ready to have a heart attack. “Absurd!”

There are already women, though very few, in the *elected* part of the Wizengamot, but, of course, there are also muggleborns there, so no one in that room takes that side of the Wizengamot seriously.

Like they never took the two women Minister they had seriously.

“It’s not like they don’t inherit already,” Rodolphus says. “In the absence of any male children-”

“They inherit gold, but a seat in the Wizengamot? Over my dead body!” Abbot spits.

Rodolphus gives him a look. “Than it will be over your dead body,” he offers.

Abbot blinks.

“Rodolphus, you are supposed to be a civilised, well bred man. You should know better than to threaten your colleagues, in a meeting. Unlike *others*,” Sirius’ grandfather chides him.

Rodolphus snorts. “We'll have a vote, your favourite activity, when the time comes. See who will win.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it,” Lucius says, even if it makes Abraxas’ face twist in pure disgust. “We will, of course, prioritise male heirs, but I, too, would rather a girl take over the family, instead of having a family die out.”

“And werewolves?” Abraxas hisses. “Do you see something wrong with that, Lucius? With beasts, that bite children, allowed to exist in peace, on our money, mind you?”

No, Lucius doesn’t agree with that, it’s obvious.

Even Rodolphus’ nose wrinkles in distaste. “It is a comprise we reached,” he says. “They won’t …mix with us. They’ll stay where they are, *away*, except when one of those feral children needs to see a Healer. It’s not so bad,” he adds.

He surely talked about this with Voldemort, in private.

“I don’t-”

“Abbot, it will happen,” Rodolphus cuts over him. “It will. Trust me. Like it or not, it will happen. We’ll pass the law.”

“Well, I am not paying for that,” Abraxas says.

“Me either-”

“Yes, pass the stupid law. If this is all the dark lord wants, and he’ll let us have everything else, than let him have it, but we’re not paying for it.”

“I agree-”

“I’ll pay for it,” Sirius says, and everyone turns to look at him.

Voldemort did so much for Sirius, agreed to see these bloody wankers, cooperate with them; Sirius will fund his fucking werewolf army.

“For *savages*. Animals. That bite children,” someone else says, but Sirius doesn’t care.

“Perhaps they won’t bite children any more, if they’re allowed to live in peace. And they never bit a child of the Twenty-Eight, let’s not pretend that ever happened, yeah?”

“You know, Sirius, we are here not just for the Twenty-Eight,” his grandfather says. “But to represent all pureblood wizards and witches. And some purebloods were bit.”

“And witches are not represented,” Sirius shoots back. “Also, grandfather, a bit pureblood child, remains a pureblood, you know? Have you considered it? There are a couple of pureblood kids in that pack, and don’t you always say a pureblood has the right to magic? To protection form muggles?”

“Their blood is now cursed, pure or not.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Whatever.” he stands. “I’m doing it. On my own, if I have to.”

“I’l contribute,” Avery says, quickly. “Sirius, I stand with you.”

Of course he will, after all the times Sirius saved his arse in Death Eater meetings.

Rodolphus sighs. “You know I’ll help,” he says, disgruntled, but too loyal to Voldemort, even if he despises werewolves.

Lucius says nothing, not with Daddy Dearest there, but he does give Sirius the tiniest of nods. Unlike Rodolphus, it’s not because of Voldemort.

It’s because Sirius also helped Lucius out, giving Voldemort bad news in his stead.

He never told Voldemort about the Azkaban-Morfin issue, that Lucius knew of it and kept it to himself.

And, of course, they are family, and Sirius’ is Draco’s Guardian, on top of it.

“Me, too,” Parkinson says, but Sirius doesn’t look at him.

Everyone hates him, for what he did to his great uncle, had him murdered.

No one respects that, and Parkinson is aware, so he's trying very hard to suck up to anyone that will have him.

(-)

Voldemort rips the hair tie out of Sirius' hair as soon as Sirius enters the cabin.

It's the first time he displays violence with Sirius. It doesn't hurt, it's just hair, but it's definitely violent, so much anger in the gesture, in how he throws the satin in the fireplace.

"You have to stand up to him. He keeps telling you that Blacks should be respected, yet how can you gain anyone's respect if he undermines you constantly, if he speaks to you in that manner, as if you're a child."

"I stand up to him," Sirius says, a little taken aback with how enraged Voldemort is.

So many things were said in that meeting, and *this* is what upset Voldemort?

"I do," he insists. "Why do you think he was there, to begin with? That he offered you a seat in the Wizengamot?"

"Fuck his seat!" Voldemort growls, and now Sirius is suddenly aroused, because Voldemort only said 'fuck' in one very specific circumstance, and now the memory replays in his head. "As if the Wizengamot matters to me!"

"He thinks that way; he…for him, that was a huge thing to offer. And he did it because of me. That hair stuff? That's not undermining me, alright? No one there thought anything of it. It's…it's grandpa stuff, you know? All of them do that. It's …normal. I am his head of house, and he does listen to me when I make it clear it's important, but he's also my grandfather, my elder. He is allowed to pick on me on silly matters."

"I killed my grandfather."

Sirius sighs. "That one had it coming," he says softly, and Voldemort looks at him with a raised eyebrow. "He did!"

Voldemort never spoke of it, before. He does not speak of the *those* muggles, no matter if he tells Sirius other things about his past.

Even so, it's pretty obvious the Riddles abandoned Tom. Voldemort didn't owe them anything.

"Grandfather raised me," Sirius explains. "We had our differences, but he loved me and took care of me. He'd trade his life for mine, for Regulus, if he had to." *You truly can't get it*. He doesn't say it again, but it's the truth. Voldemort can't understand family, because he never had one.

“I do not like him,” Voldemort growls, and it must be an understatement, but he knows how Sirius is about family, so he won’t say worse.

Sirius says it for him. “He’s difficult, annoying, and fucking insufferable, overall,” Sirius offers. “He grates on my nerves every time I see him. I don’t like him either. And I hated the way he tried to rile you up-”

Voldemort makes a noise. Sounds like a snort. “I’ve heard much worse.”

Oh, I bet. But he heard it as Tom Riddle, mostly. Not many dared after he became Voldemort.

“I did this for you,” he reminds Sirius. “I sat there, with those snobs, and gave them the country wrapped in a bow- for you.”

“I thought you said you have no interest in ruling, anyway.”

Though, really, Voldemort will still be in charge. In a way. He has an army, and he’s …well, Voldemort. No one will say no to him.

“I don’t. But it wouldn’t have ended so *favourably* for those old men, if it weren’t for you.”

“I know.” Sirius still can’t quite believe that he managed to sway Voldemort.

“I made a sacrifice.”

Again, with this *sacrifice* talk.

“I know-”

“We all need to let go of some things. To compromise a little.”

“Yes,” Sirius appeases him.

“You’ll remember it,” Voldemort hisses. "You won’t forget this.”

It sounds like an order, or it was meant as an order, but his tone raises a little with the last word, as if it’s a question.

“I won’t,” Sirius says. He smiles, reaches out, with both hands, cupping Voldemort’s face, holding it; he kisses him, softly. “When the dust settles, when the laws and the International Federation and everything calms down, you can finally walk around, wherever you please. You won’t be a wanted man anymore.”

He lets go of Voldemort’s face, but Voldemort pulls him close, and now he’s the one holding Sirius. “There aren’t many places around here I want to go to. Nor do I have a burning desire to be surrounded by the common people.”

Sirius rolls his eyes.

“Yet if the mood strikes me to wine and dine you,” Voldemort says, “to take you to a restaurant, will you join me? Will you wear the ring in public, let them see you at my side? Or will you hide me, keep me a secret, because your dear grandfather wouldn’t approve of such open displays of *deviancy*?”

Sirius blinks at him. “I wear the ring already-”

“Not today. You wear it around my loyal Death Eaters, that see me as a god, that wouldn’t look down upon you for sleeping with me. But today, with those old men-”

“I’ll wear it,” Sirius says. “I won’t- you’re not a secret. Well-” He swallows. “I’ll- Mum will be difficult, but I’ll sort it out. Somehow. I- yeah.” He is head of house. His mother will scream, she’ll refuse to talk to Sirius for a while, she’ll surely insult him, but it’s not like she can refuse to see him. She lives in his house, off his gold. Eventually, she’ll relax; in a decade or so. Once Regulus gives her a couple of grandkids. And then there’s Regulus. He won’t like it; their mother’s poison about Alphard and his proclivities buried deep into his little brother. But Sirius is his head of house, and Regulus will have to accept it, keep his disgust and disapproval to himself. “I don’t care what everyone else says.”

Though, of course, there’s James and Lily and Peter. Peter- Peter won’t judge him. He never did. He’ll think it weird, yeah, for sure, but at worst he’ll ignore it’s going on. At best he’ll accept it.

James and Lily, though. How will he explain this to them? It’s one thing to spin a story that he’d simply stopped fighting because it’s useless to fight, that he has to move on with his life, protect his brother or whatever lie he can come up with. But fucking Voldemort? Yeah, that won’t - there would be no understanding there.

It makes Sirius anxious.

(-)

“A prophecy has been made,” Voldemort says, the next night, seated at his desk, a tense air about him.

It worries Sirius. Voldemort doesn’t often look tense, especially if there’s no immediate source or circumstance to trigger it.

“Concerning me.”

Sirius waits, seated before him, because apparently this is important. Voldemort said he’ll tell Sirius what he needs to do, before ending the war.

Yet then he kept hesitating, for hours, eventually saying he is unsure where to start.

“At the beginning,” Sirius quipped, and that’s when Voldemort sat them down at his desk.

He waits, but Voldemort doesn't offer more.

"Alright," Sirius says. "A prophecy was made; I'm sure there are a hundred of those about you."

Voldemort shakes his head, once. "This is *real*. It isn't a nightmare someone had, not something to sell gossip magazines about, nor an old woman reading tarot cards."

Sirius rather doubts there is a man alive that had more tarot card readings than Voldemort. Probably every old, sherry infused witch threw the cards in an attempt to predict his fate.

For years now, witches in Knockturn especially boasted of their talent to foresee the end of the war. Their business thrived.

"Real, you say? I'm curious how you'd distinguish it from the others."

Voldemort falls silent once more.

"The source," Sirius breaks the silence again. "That's usually pretty important in establishing the validity of a prophecy."

"Human."

"Not a promising start," Sirius points out. All prophecies are iffy, at the best of times, but human made ones are the absolute worst.

"A woman named Sybill, the great granddaughter of Cassandra Trelawney made it. I've been researching this Cassandra woman for a year, hunting down the prophecies she made, and about nighty six percent of them came to fruition."

"This has been going on in your head for a *year*?"

"Yes. As I said, I wanted to make sure it comes from a credible source. And Cassandra Trelawney is, with a small margin of error, a credible source."

"I guess." Sirius, like most people, heard about her, here and there, mostly from women in his family. The men in his family, however, dismissed her as a hack.

"She predicted many things, including Grindelwald's defeat."

"Yeah, I don't know about that. My great grandfather Sirius predicted Grindelwald will lose, and he was no Seer. Same for Septimus Malfoy and a few others. Grandfather always claimed intelligent men knew it was coming."

"She was a true Seer, Sirius. I looked into it; for a *year*. I followed every *single* prophecy she made that I could find, and a great majority of them came true."

"Alright, alright!" Sirius raises his hands, placating. "She was a Seer, yeah. She was. I never heard anything about this great granddaughter of hers, though. Or anyone else in that family, actually."

“Blood gifts may skip a few generations. Your little cousin, Dora, she is a metamorphmagus, the first after your great grandfather, for example. You are the first to achieve astral projection after-”

“I’m special, my birth satisfied certain *conditions*, but yes, blood gifts can skip generations.”

“Apparently it happened with this Sybill.”

Voldemort’s jaw twitches.

Sirius sighs. “Alright. So, what? The prophecy for-warns your defeat, right? Otherwise I imagine you wouldn’t have spent a year thinking of this nonsense.”

“It did, yes.”

Sirius stares at him. “I don’t know if you noticed, but you kind of won the war. It’s done. You only have to get rid of Bagnold- wait, is that why you’re delaying with her? Merlin, just listen to grandfather and let them arrest her in that case.”

“Of course it’s not Bagnold,” Voldemort snaps. “But it does mention a person that will defeat me.”

“Oh, great, we have a name,” Sirius says, excited. That’s a good sign of a proper prophecy. The least vague they are, the more reliable. It’s easy for anyone to make shit up and then try to take credit for something that vaguely resembles what they described. But names- that’s serious business.

“Not exactly, no. But it is about a singular person.”

“Oh.” Sirius deflates. “Well, she probably had too much gillyweed and optimistically hoped Dumbledore will-”

“No. It specified the person would be….far younger than myself.”

Sirius blinks at him. “I think we’d have heard of a young, overpowered genius- it’s hard to hide the sort of skill it would be needed to bring you down, you know? Unless they’re living in a cave somewhere- otherwise, a person like that would have been *noticed*, I’m pretty sure.”

And it’s usually the other way. Almost always, in history, great men were brought down by other great men their own age or, more often than not, older.

They don’t live in those muggle fairytales Lily insists on reading to Harry, where young pretty girls always win against the old, ugly witches.

In the real magical world, magical skill and power matter. And an older person will, by default, be stronger and more knowledgeable.

His great grandfather Sirius would have no doubt wiped the floor with a twenty year old Tom Riddle. Dumbledore would have blinked him out of existence.

It took a few decades and a lot of learning for Voldemort to end up…Voldemort.

And even now, he's not exactly eager to have a one-on-one with Dumbledore, is he? Even if Dumbledore is getting *so* old, he's heading into weaker territory.

But that's a problem Voldemort doesn't have to worry about. He won't grow old, his body won't fail him, won't slowly wither to dust, so that eventually a younger man of *fifty* or so years old could attack him.

In fact, Voldemort is at the perfect, peak magical age. A wizard only truly grows into his power into his late thirties, late forties even. And then he can enjoy three or so decades of power before their body starts giving up.

There's no younger man out that would have a single chance against him.

"It's not me," Sirius jokes. "If that worries you."

Voldemort gives him a look. "You're not taking this seriously."

"Because it's- alright, *fine*. It's a prophecy from a source that could potentially have credibility. Keep an eye on it, yeah, but- it's a vague, human made prophecy. Those won't be taken seriously by many people, you know? Why don't you go straight to the source?" Sirius suggests, reminding himself this is not the times for morals or a conscience. "Have a…*talk* with this Sybill." Poor woman, unfortunate, really, but who made her spew shit about Voldemort? People should know better than this, should not attract his attention. Speaking of his defeat…she has it coming, really. "Pick at her brains, until you see-"

"You think I wouldn't have?" Voldemort snarls. "I can't. Dumbledore has her. He has her at Hogwarts."

Oh. Sirius straightens in his seat. "How so? He knows about this prophecy, too?"

"It was made *to* him, specifically. By a stroke of luck, one of my spies overheard it. A smart spy, that can detect lies. He insists her voice changed, that she sounded in a trance, even as Dumbledore was calling her name, she just kept going. Clearly, Dumbledore took it seriously, since he brought her straight to Hogwarts after that, and gave her a job. For Divination. A subject that he never wanted in his school, I'll have you know. Because he doesn't believe in it."

"Most men don't. It's a witchy affair."

"Yet Dumbledore did all this. He wouldn't have, if he didn't think it important.".

This is-

It's hard for Sirius, as a Black, to trust these things.

He was always taught only centaurs have a passing talent at guessing at the future, and there was *one* Black Seer that also was the real deal. Because if the future can be seen somewhere, by someone with this dubious talent, it is in the stars.

And centaurs, like Blacks, have a connection to astral bodies.

“It was registered at the Ministry. It appeared in the Hall of Prophecy,” Voldemort goes on.

“That doesn’t means shit,” Sirius says. “Thousands of unfulfilled prophecies gather dust in that room.”

“It’s guarded, non stop, I am told. That room has *never* been guarded before. Yet now Moody spends most of his days there, instead of at Bagnold’s side. This is considered more important than the Minister’s life. One of my men managed to spot it. An Unspeakable.”

Voldemort reaches into a drawer and hands a note to Sirius. “This was the label.”

S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D

Dark Lord

(?)

“Well this just fills me with confidence.” He can’t help the sarcasm, he really can’t. This is absurd. *Merlin’s cock, I forgot how many names Dumbledore has.* “What does the B stand for?”

“What?”

“In Dumbledore’s name. B-…damn, I can’t remember.”

“Brian.”

“Right, right. Well, it’s not even about you. It says ‘dark lord’.”

“I *am* the dark lord.”

“You’re not the *only* dark lord in the world.”

“Sirius-”

“Fine, let’s say it’s you. There’s a fucking question mark under you.”

Are questions your mortal enemy, Sirius almost quips.

“Was there at least a date mentioned? A year, any semblance of a timeline? Or could it be about a dark lord in Greenland, a thousand years from now, and a younger, prettier lad that will take his place?”

“You’re impossible!” Voldemort stands, and in the blink of an eye he’s out of the cabin, clearly angry.

That means that no, there is no time frame.

Sirius sighs. *Prophecies, really.*

There are prophecies that predict the end of the world, several of them, made through the past millennia, some even reached the muggles, and so far the world still stands.

Sirius isn't too worried about this.

(-)

Andromeda doesn't throw him out when Sirius goes to see her. For all she screamed, last he saw her, that she doesn't want him around her daughter, Andromeda steps aside and grants him entrance.

She didn't want him near Dora, because she discovered his Dark Mark. Yet with the world going to hells around them, with the Death Eaters clearly winning, it seems she can see some benefits in having an evil Death Eater on her side.

You have more than one, Sirius thinks.

Andromeda isn't happy to see him, there's no mistake about that, but she's smart, she's a Slytherin, and if suffering Death Eaters means she and her family will be safe, she'll do it.

He wonders if she regrets marrying Ted, as she finds herself on the losing side of a war; if she stays up at night and imagines how easy her life would be is she'd had married Lucius instead. If she thinks *'Narcissa doesn't have to worry about her son's safety; she doesn't have to worry if he'll ever be accepted in our world'.*

Or if she doesn't regret it, even now. If love truly does conquer all. Sirius would understand her if that was the case. He understands her as a man in love. But as Head of House Black, he can't afford to sympathise with her.

He has a duty- to his family, to his father. To Andromeda and little Dora, even. What he feels doesn't matter. He has to protect them, even if no doubt Andromeda will hate him for what he'll ask- demand- of her.

"Tea?" she asks, awkwardly. She never before asked if he wants tea.

"No, thank you," he says, just as awkward. "I only came to check in on you and Dora."

Just then, Dora burst out of her room, comes running down the small hallway.

"Padfoot!" She jumps, and he catches her in his arms, twirls her around.

He sees her every-week; well, almost. These past weeks, he hadn't gone to retrieve her from her muggle school.

Cygnus had.

"If he scares you, if he hurts you, you will write to me," Sirius instructed her. *"You'll be all alone next week. If he does anything to scare you, I must know about it."*

"Cygnus?" she asks, incredulous. "He's not scary at all!" She laughs, looking at Sirius as if he's an idiot for suggesting such a thing could happen. "He's just weird and stiff, but scary? Ha! Mama is scarier than him when she's in a mood."

So far, Sirius received no letter.

Lucius commented, suspicious, that Cygnus is behaving oddly when he comes to visit Draco and Narcissa.

"He's almost….dare I say…happy," Lucius whispered the last word, as if it's a crime to accuse of Black of acting happy. At least *that* Black. *"He smiled. It disturbed Narcissa. It disturbed me, to be honest. I've never seen him smile!"*

"Draco must be responsible," Sirius lied. While he has no doubt Cygnus likes Draco, or at the very least he's proud his daughter did her duty and provided her husband with a boy, Cygnus has no rights to Draco. No control over him. Draco, no matter his Black blood, belongs to the Malfoys, and Cygnus will respect that. Cygnus respects Lucius and Abraxas.

He does not respect Ted. He does not acknowledge Ted, nor does he recognise Andromeda's marriage, because he doesn't see it as real, since no magical vows were performed. A muggle marriage certificate or whatever they call it means nothing to a wizard.

In his head, little Dora belongs to him, in a way Draco never will.

And it's not just in his head, either. Sirius thinks of her as a Black, too.

"Perhaps," Lucius allowed. *"Draco does melt hearts, doesn't he? Except Father's,"* he muttered, darkly.

"Missed you," Dora says, kissing his cheek.

"Missed you, too."

She grins at him. "What did you bring me?"

"You are a terror," Sirius mock scolds her.

She laughs, and he puts her down and hands her a gift he picked up for her. She runs to the couch, ripping the box apart.

"I also brought you something." Sirius takes the picture from his robe pocket and gives it to Andromeda.

They don't have many pictures. His family preferred portraits to candid photographs, but they did have a camera. Uncle Alphard was responsible for taking most pictures of their family.

And not the staged ones that they took, once in a while, all haughty and blank faced, staring at the camera as if it's below them to be captured on film.

Oh, no. Uncle Alphard took real, honest pictures. He took this one, too.

Andromeda looks down at it, and her stoic face crumbles.

It's at the Black Manor, clearly taken before his mother hated the place, before strange women started appearing there.

She's dressed in a gorgeous red dress, seated on the couch in their least formal living room. Regulus is so tiny he can't even be spotted inside his blanket, just a lump in his mother's arms, held to her chest. She looks down at him with a smile, from time to time, moves her hand to arrange something on him.

His father is on her right side, an arm over her shoulder. She's leaning into him, and when she isn't looking at Regulus, she whispers something in his father's ear.

He smiles, wild and honest in a way Sirius never saw him smile. He looks so happy, it's almost painful to witness.

He looks young, and his robe is parted, the first button on his shirt opened.

There was clearly a great deal of firewhiskey consumed that night, the evidence on the table, many bottles and glasses scattered all over it.

Sirius is very young, too, young enough that apparently he was still allowed to suck on his thumb. He's perched on his father's knee, clutching a toy dragon to his chest.

His father's other arm is on his shoulder, rubbing small circles with his fingers.

On his mother's other side, Cygnus sits; he must have been drunk too, because the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up. His hair is a bit in disarray. Bella, even if too old for it, sits on one of his knees. She bends and looks down at baby Regulus, curiously, before she leans back into her father. On Cygnus' other knee, Andromeda has a large smile on her face, with two teeth missing. She says something, and Cygnus smirks, runs his finger through her hair.

Besides Cygnus, Druella looks normal, no trace of the vacant expression Sirius remembers from his childhood, that only got worse after Andromeda left.

She seems present in the moment, and she looks beautiful and young, blonde hair cascading around her, longer that Sirius can ever remember seeing it in real life.

Narcissa is in her lap, holding a porcelain doll, busy with trying to braid the doll's hair. Her own hair is braided, though a few strands had come out.

They all look like a normal family, like a family that had a good night.

Alphard's birthday, Sirius knows, because the date is written in ink on the back of the photograph.

And there is Alphard. He runs in and out of the picture. It's clear he set the camera up, and he comes into view, quickly, his wand in his hand, probably to charm the camera to snap the picture once he's ready.

He throws himself on the floor, between his sister and brother's legs, and then he says something, no doubt summoning Kreacher, who appears out of nowhere.

Alphard takes him in his arms, holds him like a child, and everyone starts laughing.

His father throws his head back, his mother shakes so hard with laugher that the blanket falls a bit to the side, revealing parts of Regulus' little body.

Cygnus shakes his head, but it's clear he's laughing, too, even if most of his face is now hidden in Andromeda's hair.

Even Kreacher is laughing.

It was a joke, Uncle Alphard told Sirius, when he showed him the picture, when Sirius was about six years old.

"They were there with their sons and daughters, posing proudly. I had no children, so I summoned Kreacher to serve as one. I said 'look, I have a baby too, even if he's six hundred years'."

Andromeda is struggling with her face- it does weird things, muscles twitching, eyelids fluttering, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Andromeda must remember this moment in a way Sirius can't. She was old enough to remember it, old enough to perhaps have some other recollection of this happy, casual event. The sort of thing that happened less and less as Sirius grew up.

His mother turned hateful through the years, his father turned to stone. Cygnus became meaner, Alphard more distant; having no children was no longer funny, the more the years passed and he didn't marry.

"It wasn't all bad," Sirius says. "You know it wasn't."

"What is the meaning of this?" She looks up to him, gaze as sharp as her father's.

"I know it was horrible at times. I know. I was there. But it wasn't horrible all the time."

"Sirius-"

"They loved you. They loved me. They love us still, the way they can, the way they were taught."

"It's harmful," she says. "It's twisted, the way they love. I only learned true love, when I met Ted. Gentle, and safe, and unconditional, unlike the type of love I grew up with, you grew up with, too."

“We are family,” Sirius talks over her. “We share blood. And we are the only thing standing between you and those that would harm you. But if you want to keep that privilege, if you want to make sure Ted’s life won’t be disturbed, that Dora will be respected and accepted in our world, than you must reconcile with your parents.”

Andromeda inhales sharply. Her nostrils dilate. “Are you threatening Ted?”

He holds her gaze. “Yes,” he says, simply, softly, with no hesitation. The way his father would have said it. “You see, Cygnus does love you, Andromeda. He *let you go*. You ran like a coward- I gave them warning, at least. No one was surprised when I left. But you- you were the *good* daughter. You never complained, you never screamed- not like Bella; gods, if Bella left, I’m sure no one would have been shocked. But it was you- you, that agreed to marry Lucius, when Cygnus asked you. You smiled, nodded, you said he was a lovely match. It came out of *nowhere*, you little snake. You gave them no warning, no chance to fix anything, to appease you.”

“Because I was too afraid to say something!” she hisses. “I was afraid to tell Father ’no’.”

“Why? Gods, *why*? He’s a shit father, but what did he do to you that was so horrible you were afraid to tell him ‘no’? What, he spanked you once or twice when you were a child? Even when he lost his fucking marbles, he lost it on Bella, not you. She protected both you and Cissa, and you didn’t even let her know that you were leaving, that you were apparently miserable. We all thought you were happy!”

Sirius never considered something was amiss with poised, perfect, Slytherin Andromeda, that could do no wrong in their family’s eyes.

How long has she plotted against us, in secret? How many year did she pretend to love them, to be the good daughter?

She opens her mouth again, but Sirius talks over her.

“Like I said, he does love you, because here you are, unharmed, even if you tainted our name. Your husband walks around, unharmed as well. The world is going to shit, muggleborns are fired left and right, or they quit their jobs in fear, yet Ted- Ted is fine, isn’t he?”

“You-”

“I am now Head of House. If you want my protection, then you will reconcile with us. I cannot harm you, and I will not harm Dora. But…” he lets the threat hang in the air.

Does she think me capable of it? Sirius wants her to think him capable of murdering Ted, or ordering his death. He wants her to believe it, so she would listen to him.

Yet a part of him feels betrayed when she does; when her eyes widen in fear as she stares at him.

Don’t you know me? he wants to ask.

Is it a wonder that the rest of the world thinks Sirius deranged, if his own cousin doesn't doubt it?

You would do it, a voice whispers. *If pushed to it, you would. Stop hiding from yourself, Sirius.*

The voice sounds Iike Voldemort's and his father's at once, and it's the *first* time Sirius imagines they would be in agreement on any subject.

"I expect you and Dora at Grimmauld, Saturday night. If you don't show up, I will come to retrieve you."

Andromeda does look terrified.

To put her at ease, because since he's now surrounded by mothers, he knows their primary concern is the wellbeing of their children, he adds: "Dora already met Cygnus. Several times. You have nothing to worry about. He likes her. I wouldn't bring her in the snake den, if he didn't like her."

It has the opposite effect. It seems to scare her more. She looks to the living room, where Dora is playing with her new toys, her eyes going over her as if to reassure herself Dora is fine.

"You can't keep her away from us," Sirius says. "We've been taking her out of school for months, out in broad daylight, in Knockturn and Diagon, and *no one* told you or Ted about it. Because the entire world knows to mind their business where Blacks are concerned."

And now Andromeda is also furious, not only scared. She opens her mouth, but them seems to reconsider.

She nods, sharply, tensely.

"Please," Sirius says. "*Please*, come Saturday. Don't run away again, there's nowhere to run anymore. And I will find you. I will bring you back home, like my father would have, if you hadn't left when he was sick, when he was unable to fix it."

"You left when he was sick, too," she says, fighting with the only weapon she has left. She is a Black, after all. She will hurt back. "I wonder what he'd have done if he weren't sick; if he'd have hunted me down, I wonder what he'd have done to *you*."

Sirius laughs, even if there's nothing funny about it. She flinches.

"Neither of us would have left, had Father been healthy and able to track us. We wouldn't have dared. For all you complain about Cygnus, for all his temper and outbursts, we know he wasn't the terrifying one in our family." Once more, he says this softly, as his father spoke.

Why would Orion Back ever raise his voice, when he knew everyone around him would shut up, to make sure they hear him?

Cygnus slapped Bella, even Andy, a few times, when they fucked up. Especially Bella, who was prone to fighting back, hissing and snarling at her father. She fought back, because she knew the worst Cygnus would do was what he already did. A slap, or take her over his knee for a quick spanking.

The way Sirius talked back to his grandfather and mother, not very concerned with the prospect of a measly physical punishment.

But oh, he never talked back to his father. *No one* did. Some snark as Sirius grew older, some sarcastic replies, and his mother certainly yelled at him all the time, but they never truly disobeyed him.

Because while he never struck them, never touched them in anger, not even to shake them, or push them into their rooms, there was something about him that promised something much worse than a slap if they disobeyed. No one ever wanted to find out what would happen if they pushed him too hard.

Sirius instinctively knew there was a limit his father was willing to tolerate, a line that couldn't be crossed. In the last couple of years, Sirius sometimes stepped dangerously close to that line, but never *over* it.

When Andromeda left, his father was still conscious, he was still moving around, but he was getting weaker by the day, with no time left to spare.

"You will bring her back," he told Sirius. *"You will show that mudblood why no one steals from Blacks. Cygnus loves her too much to teach her this harsh lesson, he's soft with her, but you won't be. You can't be soft. You're my Heir. You must grow up and become the shield that guards our family and our reputation, always remember that. You can't allow a mudblood to take what belongs to us, with impunity- it would make us look weak."*

Sirius didn't want to hear talk of shields, of replacing his father, but here he is now.

And, he hopes he won't need to hurt Ted.

It won't come to that, because while Sirius is not yet a proper shield, his father was.

His father's reputation was so fierce, that it's the only thing needed to scare Andromeda into compliance.

(-)

No one is happy with him. Except Cygnus, which is odd. Cygnus and Sirius never got along, so it's still weird to find himself on the same side as his uncle.

"I don't need friends, I have family. I don't need to like Cygnus and Alphard. They are my blood and I have a duty to love them and protect them, and they have a duty to do the same

for me," his father once told him.

All the rest are glaring at Sirius something fierce. Well- perhaps his mother isn't. Or not more than usual, in any case.

Bella was the hardest to convince. He only managed with *'you killed Marlene. You owe me.'*

'If I do this, you'll let it go,' she said, after a few seconds. *'If I do this, you'll let that ugly business rest and you won't ever use it against me again.'*

Marlene is dead, beyond help. But Dora is alive, so Sirius agreed. For her. For Andromeda. For their family.

For his father. *See, you can be proud of me,* he almost begs in his head, even knowing nothing he'll ever do will make his father forgive him for other transgressions Sirius is committing.

"Oh, he's so funny looking!" Dora's voice comes from the hallway, as Dobby introduces himself to them, receiving them at the door. And then, her voice higher. "Mama, what are those? Are those *heads* on the wall?"

"Stay close to me," Andromeda's voice joins her, as they climb down the stairs. "Don't look at the walls, don't touch anything. Remember what I told you."

Druella has a reaction. She jerks all over, and quickly pulls a vial out of her robe pocket, downs it in one go. Bella usually scowls when her mother does this, but this time she's too busy staring at the dinner knife she's clenching.

Narcissa is made of ice. She only came because Lucius asked her; she refused Sirius straight up, she refused Cygnus, but Lucius truly could sweet talk a wall. He's seated next to her.

Rodolphus isn't there. Sirius judged that a fight between Cygnus and Rodolphus was the last thing that was needed in this already volatile situation.

When the girls enter the kitchen, Sirius, Cygnus and Lucius stand, as gentlemen should.

Sirius picked the kitchen, because it's the cosiest part of the house, the smallest. It will force them to stay close to each other at the table, no room for six feet between any of them.

Regulus remains seated, chair close to Narcissa's, joined in their hatefulness.

"Hello!" Dora says. She looked a bit spooked when she entered, but she smiles when she sees Sirius and Cygnus.

Yet the smile is fast to disappear when no one answers her, silence stretching on for tense seconds.

"Hello," Sirius says, having hoped maybe someone would do something- well, Druella or Lucius, mostly. They're not Blacks, so they could have said hello, show some warmth, some joy perhaps to see Andromeda again. Alas, Lucius won't help more than he already did, with

bringing Narcissa over, and Druella's potion must have taken effect instantly, because she smiles softy, staring straight ahead, eyes glazed over.

Andromeda stays quiet, too. Her head is held up, nose in the air, no trace of fear on her face, but Sirius can see it in the too stiff line of her shoulders.

Dora is starting to get real nervous, shifting on her feet.

"Come, let me introduce you to our family," Sirius says, going to her, taking her hand in his, and walking back towards the table.

"This is my eldest cousin, Walburga," Sirius says, trying to ease the tension, to make someone laugh. And Bella's lips quirk upward, slightly, Lucius' eyes smile, even if the rest of his face doesn't.

His mother scowls at him, unimpressed.

"Your cousin?" Dora whispers. "I- ok." She looks so confused. Probably Andromeda finally talked about family, cornered as she was, and she mentioned them by name, to prepare Dora for the meeting.

"She's my mother," Sirius smiles down at her. "And also my cousin, yes. A little joke but apparently no one has a sense of humour anymore."

"Hello, Mrs Walburga," Dora says, anxious, looking up. "No, sorry," she corrects herself. "Mrs Black?"

"Both are fine," Sirius says, though that's not technically true. But no use in confusing her further. She's confused enough, because she whispers.

"Sirius, do I curtsy? I forget -"

In the graveyard silence, her soft whisper might as well have been a shout.

"No, just to men," he tells her. He waits for a second, gives his mother a chance to say something. She doesn't, but at least she looks at Dora. She seems…curious.

"Speaking of," Sirius leads Dora a bit further. "My brother, Regulus."

Dora tries a curtsy. It's hilarious. She can barely stand on her own two feet at the best of times, with how clumsy she is. A curtsy is too much to hope for.

She almost falls on her face as she loses her balance, but Sirius holds her up.

Regulus does not acknowledge her. *He and Narcissa are the fucking worst*, so Sirius moves her along without waiting, without pausing as he says, "and this is Narcissa, your aunt."

"Sirius, are they deaf?" Dora 'whispers' again. "I don't think they can hear us."

"This is Lucius, your uncle," Sirius says, a bit louder.

“Hello,” Lucius offers, finally a sane person.

Dora breathes out, relieved. “Hi,” she says, a bit uncertain. “Wow, you have nice hair, like Sirius!”

“Thank you,” Lucius’ face softens a degree or so. Narcissa elbows him in the ribs.

Sirius pulls her further. “This is Bella, your other aunt.”

Remember our deal, Sirius thinks. If she doesn’t play nice, Sirius will start screaming about Marlene as soon as Dora leaves the-

“Well, look at you,” Bella drawls, leaning back in her chair.

“Mrs Bella- no, Black- no, wait!” Dora crunches her face. “Ah- “

Bella laughs, her saccharine fake laugh. “None of that, Bella will do.”

“Oh, good,” Dora says, relieved. “I’m Dora. Nice to meet you!”

“Aren’t you a beauty,” Bella purrs and she’s always been touchy, so she reaches over, takes hold of a few strands of Dora’s hair, rubs them between her fingers.

Dora blushes all over. She shifts on her feet again, her eyes taking in Bellatrix, fully, eyes roaming all over her.

“You’re very beautiful, too!” She offers, so awed, so honest, even Bella’s eyes soften. “I take after Mama,” Dora goes on. “She’s -“

“You do,” Bella agrees, eyes going hard again.

Sirius takes Dora past her chair. Before he can even say something, Druella pulls out *another* potion and downs it, so Sirius doesn’t stop, leads Dora back to where they started, letting go of her hand.

“Shall we?” he asks, gesturing at the table, glancing at Andromeda.

The only two chairs that are free are between Sirius and Cygnus. It’s clear Andromeda does not want to sit near her father, but then she goes for that chair anyway, all martyr like, probably imagining she’s sparing Dora of some burden.

But Dora is already climbing into that seat, very comfortable with Cygnus, unlike her mother, so Andromeda sits next to Sirius.

The silence persists, as Dobby serves them. He whimpers when he goes close to Lucius, trembles so hard a few olives fall from a plate he’s holding.

Dora’s eyes track Dobby, curious.

It's so difficult to think of something to say- something that won't end up with someone fighting, at least.

Nothing comes to him, so he starts eating. It's so weird. There has never been a dinner as silent as this one in this house.

Narcissa and Regulus don't eat, in some sort of stupid protest.

"I won't eat with that blood traitor," Narcissa informed Sirius.

"I won't share food with a half-blood," Regulus huffed.

Starve, then, Sirius thinks, annoyed with them both.

His mother doesn't eat either, but he doubts it has anything to do with their guests. She rarely eats these days, picking at her food whenever they eat together, preferring to sip at a cup of wine or firewhsikey. It breaks Sirius' heart, so he doesn't look at her too closely.

He wishes Snuffles were there, he would be friendly with Dora.

But if Snuffles were there, he'd be on the table, eating all their food, and gods forbid he's told off, then he starts howling his head off, *forever*. Not even Sirius' mother can out-scream him.

Sirius isn't hungry, but he needs to do *something*, so he eats.

"Uhhh," Dora says. "Cygnus, I think that lady needs help,"

"She's fine." Cygnus waves it away.

Dora is looking at Druella, who just passed out, slumping in her chair, her chin resting on her chest. Two potions in five minutes was a bit too much, apparently.

Andromeda looks *shocked*, and she opens her mouth, but closes it again, fast.

"Is she sick?"

"No, just tired," Cygnus answers.

"She is sick," Bella intervenes. "No need to lie, Father, Dora seems like a bright young lady. She can handle it."

"Bella-" Cygnus hisses.

"This is my mother. Your grandmother."

"Ah." Dora looks between Andromeda, Bella, and Druella.

"Her heart broke some years ago." And finally, Bellatrix looks at Andromeda.

No one in the world can glare quite like Bellatrix. Perhaps Voldemort, but just *perhaps*. Her eyes are on fire, loaded with so many things, Andromeda *shrinks*, visibly becomes smaller.

Only then does Bella move her gaze to Dora, thankfully less intensely. There's no *'you did this, you broke our mother'* aimed at Dora.

"Since then, she has to take medicine, you see. It makes her sleepy."

"Oh, I'm sorry! What made her sick?"

"Nymphadora," Andromeda says, voice weak.

"Don't call me Nymphadora!"

"She lost something very precious to her. It causes her immense pain. A pain no mother should feel."

Sirius makes sure not to look at his own mother, drinking alcohol instead of potions. He shoves more food in his mouth.

It's not fair. Neither of these women were good mothers. Druella was distant with Bella and Andromeda, resented them for not being sons. She probably transferred the guilt and pressure put on her to deliver a boy, on her first two daughters. At least Narcissa looked like her, was quiet and withdrawn. Whatever the reason, Druella was not a good mother, and neither was Sirius', yet now they make them feel guilty for it anyway, for 'breaking their hearts'.

You were both bitches before we left, Sirius reminds himself, mostly because it's too painful for him to imagine he had anything to do with the state his mother is in.

"Come here," Bella demands, and the fact that she takes Dora away from Andy, *directly* after what she said... "Dobby, bring me a chair, so the girl can sit beside me. Come, sweet thing, it's dreadfully boring on that side of the table. Sit with Auntie Bella."

Andromeda doesn't protest to this, possibly because she doesn't truly think Bella would ever cause harm to her daughter. More likely, she doesn't protest because tears have gathered in her eyes, and she keeps her gaze trained on Druella.

Luckily, it gets easier after that. Dora moves to sit beside Bella, and they start talking, Dora more and more animated under Bella's attention.

Slowly, Sirius relaxes.

And there's that moment, as the second course is served, when Cygnus slaps Dobby over the head when he tries to put a plate in front of Andromeda.

"No, incompetent fool, she likes her salad on the side," he spits, and Dobby immediately rectifies the situation, separating the dishes.

For a second, Andromeda looks at her father, something surprised and tender in her eyes, but Cygnus doesn't look at her, as focused as Sirius on his own food.

Bella and Dora aren't eating much, busy with talking, and now Dora morphs, because Bella asked her.

She turns into an exact copy of Bella, not that she wasn't half-there already.

"That's quite remarkable," Lucius says, and he gets elbowed again, but he pretends not to notice it, and Narcissa only grinds her jaws tighter.

Even Regulus can't help but look at Dora and her remarkable skill. It's not something one sees every day. In fact, Regulus hadn't seen a metamorphmagus since their great grandfather Sirius died, and Regulus was so young when that happened, he most likely barely remembers the man.

Andromeda, caught between all the emotions in the word, shifting rapidly through them, apparently decides annoying Narcissa is what she wants to do.

Her eyes narrow when Narcissa elbows Lucius for the second time, so she puts down the fork she was using to play with her food, and smiles at Lucius.

"I hear you have a son, Lucius."

"Yes."

Does she know nothing gets Lucius talking like someone mentioning Draco?

Regulus groans, knowing what's coming.

Undeterred by Narcissa's pointy elbows, Lucius launches into a five minutes monologue they all heard before about how perfect Draco is.

"Congratulations," Andromeda offers, when he finally shuts up, but it was only a break to breathe.

"He did magic, already. Not much, but he's definitely a proper wizard," he says, chest puffed with pride. "When did your daughter start showing signs?"

"Oh, very early on. At least her metamorphmagus skills. From the first hour of her birth, her hair starting changing colours. Other than that, she had her first bout of accidental magic at one-year-old. I was trying to feed her some peas pure and she wasn't having it. She exploded the plate right in my face."

"Strong Black blood," Cygnus says, pleased.

Andromeda says nothing to that. What is there to say, after all? It's not like Dora got her unique bloodline gift from Ted, is it?

"Where is the scary grandfather?" Dora's voice pipes up. "Mama said there's a scary one, and a little bit less scary one-"

"Oh, Arcturus is away on business," Bella says.

Arcturus said, *'I don't disapprove, exactly. It is good for Andromeda to return. But I am not yet ready to embrace them myself, if you don't mind.'*

“And Pollux lives in France,” Bella goes on.

“And where is my other aunt? The scary one- Bellatrix Lestrange?”

Bella blinks at her. Cygnus and Lucius both smile. Even Sirius’ mother huffs.

“I am Bellatrix,” she says. “Bella is short for Bellatrix.”

“No way!” Dora stares at her. “But you don’t look scary at all! You look like the most beautiful princess!”

“I can be both,” Bella says, pleased and amused.

“Wow! People are afraid of you! Mama scared some, just by mentioning you.”

“Nymphadora-”

Bella frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Really, Nymphadora!”

“Some men threatened us in Diagon, called us ugly names, cornered us into a wall, but Mama said-”

“Who?” Cygnus snarls, finally looking at his runaway daughter. “Who *dared*?”

A moment passes, their eyes meet, and they take each other in, and this could be a start, a-

“Your friends,” Andromeda says, coldly.

Oh, come on, Sirius curses in his head. He shoves another spoonful into his mouth.

“Anyway, they left real quick when they heard of you,” Dora keeps going, unconcerned. “Are you an Auror? I want to be an Auror! But Mama says women can’t be Aurors-“

“She’s right,” Cygnus turns to her. “I told you, women don’t work-”

“Women can be anything they want,” Bella declares, loudly.

Sirius’ mother snorts so hard, wine comes out of her nose.

“We can do anything a man can, and we’ll look prettier doing it.”

“Yes!” Dora lifts her fist in the air, victorious. “I will be an Auror! I will be strong, and I will catch those bad people that killed Sirius’ girlfriend!”

If Sirius puts more food in his mouth, he’ll choke.

“Aurors are a disgrace right now,” Bella says, with no shame. “They forgot their vows, their true purpose. To protect the Wizarding world from muggles. But, do not worry your pretty little head- *gorgeous*, darling- soon enough, we shall have new Aurors, loyal ones. They shall

be Great Britain's elite force one more, after we clean up that Department. By the time you grow up, all will be in order again, as it should have been. And if you'll still want to be an Auror, I have no doubt you will be one of the best. And certainly the most beautiful."

No one says anything to that, because Bella has the crazy look in her eyes, that means if questioned, she will go on about the greatness of Lord Voldemort and how he will fix the world.

Best not bring that up.

The two of them keep talking, heads lowered, and when dessert comes, they eat it from the same plate, already best friends.

When it ends, Dora hugs Bella, who hugs her back. Cygnus pats her shoulder. Lucius tells her goodbye, and he even bids Andromeda a good night.

The yelling starts as soon as the girls leave.

Cygnus at Bella, for putting wrong ideas in Dora's head. "One of you was enough, I don't need two."

Narcissa doesn't yell, but she hisses furiously in Lucius' ear, accusatory. Sirius thinks he hears 'traitor', and not as in Andromeda, but as in *Lucius, for* speaking to Andromeda.

His mother screams at Druella, trying to rouse her from her potion induced slumber, and *'get everyone out of my house.'*

Regulus calls Sirius a traitor, too, and goes on about the shame of having a half-blood in their house.

Snuffles whines and howls from somewhere above, wherever he's been locked.

Finally, Sirius can talk back, now that he's no longer worried he'll make everything worse for Dora, so it goes on quite a bit, until they are all exhausted.

"The debt is paid," Bellatrix says, voice horse, as she walks past him, to the fireplace.

"Yes," he agrees. "Fine."

Bella did great. He doesn't know what they'd have done without her.

Sirius climbs up the stairs, goes to one of their living rooms, and pulls out his wand, faced with the tapestry.

He touches his father's name, the letters rough under his fingers.

With his other hand, he taps the wand on the wall.

His own name appears again, as if it had never been burned off.

The same happens to Andromeda's.

"If you say something," he warns, not turning, but feeling Regulus' eyes on his back. "You'll find *your* name burned off."

Regulus disobeys him, knowing Sirius would never do that.

"Andromeda is our blood, fine. But if you add that little half-blood to the tapestry, *I* will burn my own name off, I assure you. Father would roll over in his grave."

"Father wanted the family-"

"He wanted the blood traitor back. He didn't know about the half-blood. He would have *never* accepted that abomination, and if he had, just to get Andromeda, he would have never *officially* acknowledged it. Do right by him, Sirius. He would never consent to having a mudblood's name on our proud walls."

Sirius doesn't add Dora to the family tree.

(-)

"What's wrong?" Sirius asks, hurrying inside. Prongs' patronus said it's urgent.

He only grows more worried when he sees Remus there.

Lily is crying, holding on to Harry, so tightly it makes Harry cry, too.

"Sirius is here, now can you finally tell us what's this about?" Peter asks. "You're scaring the fuck out of -"

James is as white as the wall behind him. His eyes meet Sirius'.

"Voldemort is coming after us. After Harry."

(-)

Sirius takes the ring off. He has the impulse to throw it out the window, but in the end he just shoves it in his robe pocket.

He sits, quietly, between Remus and Peter, as James explains what Dumbledore told them about a prophecy.

The fucking prophecy.

This can't be real. This can't be happening.

"But he's a baby," Peter keeps saying, interrupting James.

Lily keeps sobbing beside James.

James makes an ugly noise. "Does it seems like he cares about babies, Peter? He's a fucking madman-"

"No, I mean- I mean how can a baby defeat him?"

"Like I said, he's a fucking lunatic. No sane man would have tortured this entire country for a decade.

"What does Dumbledore suggest?" Remus asks, hands trembling.

Lily looks at him when he speaks, wary. She pulls Harry even closer to her, shields him with her arms. She's giving them all suspicious looks.

"The Fidelius," James says. "He said to do it immediately. Voldemort finally picked between Harry and Neville, his spy told him. He's going to move swiftly. Dumbledore offered to be the Secret Keeper."

"Do it," Remus urges him. "James, do it, right now! Why the fuck are you here with us, you should be under the Fidelius already!"

The suspicion goes out of Lily's eyes when she looks at Remus now. "Yes, we have to do it. We wanted to tell you, first, but we should go to Hogwarts, right now."

James hesitates.

"James, *come on*!"

"I don't trust him," James says. "I-"

"You don't trust *Dumbledore*?" Remus looks at him like James has lost his mind.

"I don't trust he has our best interest in mind. I don't trust he can actually defeat Voldemort or hold him back. Look at him! He's hiding! In a school! While people are dying on the streets. If he could have done something, he would have done. And if he *can* do something, but he won't…well, what does that say about him, huh?"

"Whatever it says, whatever happens, if he can defeat Voldemort or not," Lily says, voice high, "at least I know for sure he would keep the Secret for us. Even if he's taken, even if he falls, no one would get the Secret out of him."

"He didn't tell us! This has been going on since before Harry was born, and he didn't say shit!"

"He said he waited for Voldemort to pick someone, to pick between Harry and Neville-"

“And that doesn’t sound fucking monstrous to you?” James snaps at her. “He waited for Voldemort to *pick?* What the fuck, these are babies we’re taking about. *My* baby. Harry was clearly a potential target for a fucking year and he didn’t say shit! *Now* he says it! Now he wants to be the hero, to help! Now that the war is fucking done already! If he’d have told us before, we would have left the country-”

“I told you we should have left!”

“Well, if I’d have known that motherfucker will target my son, best believe we’d be in Siberia by now! But I didn’t know because Dumbledore didn’t fucking tell me! And he has the nerve, after all this, to sit there and ask me not to tell Sirius and Remus about the prophecy, not to trust them with this.”

Remus looks pained. He winces. Dumbledore is his hero, his saviour. To hear he’s distrusted by Dumbledore is breaking Remus’ heart.

“I’ll do it,” Sirius says. “I’ll perform the Fidelius.”

James looked mostly at him, the entire time, pleading. Scared. Sirius stayed quiet, unable to speak, unable to think.

But the shock breaks. He’ll think later.

“I can’t ask it of you,” James says, quietly. “It would mean-”

“You don’t have to ask. I’m doing it. You’d have done the same for me.”

“I offered, remember? When Voldemort came after you.”

“When what?” Remus stares between them.

“And you said ‘no’,” James goes on. “You said you’d never put me in that position-”

“This is about Harry, James,” Sirius barks at him. “We’re grown men, we can play noble friends all we want, but this is about Harry, not you. I’m doing this for Harry, who can’t speak for himself.”

He’s doing it for James, of course, but it’s hard for James to ask Sirius to die for him. So best make it about Harry.

Sirius stands. “Alright. I’m going to get a book on the Fiedelius. I suppose none of us knows the charm by heart?”

It’s a complicated one, but any competent wizard should be able to cast it, with a bit of attention and care.

“Say your goodbyes,” Sirius tells Remus and Peter. “You won’t be seeing James again once I come back.”

“Wait-” James stands.

“No. There’s no waiting. Voldemort is single-minded. If he’s made his choice, there’s no time to delay. I’m going to be right back.”

Sirius hugs James, tightly. James hugs back, clings to him, and he starts shaking, starts crying.

Sirius feels like weeping, too. But no tears come.

He holds James for a few seconds, and then he leaves without another word.

(-)

Sirius can’t tell what he’s feeling. He went numb from the second he heard the words coming out of James’ mouth.

It’s not a shocked type of numb, because in a way, he *isn’t* shocked.

He feels betrayed, there’s a vague sense of anger, but his mind is terrifyingly clear.

A part of him doesn’t understand why he isn’t screaming at the top of his lungs, why he isn’t crying, why he’s so calm.

Deeper than that, Sirius already feels resigned, in a cold type of way. In that space in his head, growing larger with every second he walks, Sirius knows this is a lost battle.

He felt the same way, when his father told him he was dying.

His parents watch him closely in the silence that fell over the room. His mother is seated beside Regulus, on the couch. His head is already hidden in her chest, her hand in his hair. But she’s looking at Sirius.

His father is behind his desk, face impassive.

Sirius knows they expect him to explode, any second now.

“How long?” he asks, instead. “How long do you have left?”

“The best guess is around a month.”

Regulus made a strangled sound, and their mother hugged him tighter.

Sirius knew, then, too, that it was over. His father told him it was over, yet a part of his brain insisted it cannot be, that there’s still a chance, a way to make it go away.

And that same foolish hope is with him as he walks through the forest. Yet he knows it’s in vain. He does. He knew back when he was sixteen, and he knows it now, too, yet that deceiving hope makes him want to cling to something, to an alternative route.

Sirius Apparated further away from the cabin, needing a few minutes to breathe, to walk.

The last few minutes of his life, as he knows it. Because once he goes inside that cabin, everything will change.

He knows that in a day's time, he'll want to go back to this present time, when he didn't yet know *for sure* it was doomed. When there was still that foolish hope.

Tomorrow Sirius will envy Today Sirius.

His anger awakens, once the cabin is in view.

His mind continues to function perfectly. Quite fast, too. It knows what it will happen, it prepares him for it, the plan already formed, crystal clear.

Voldemort will not listen. Sirius will become Secret Keeper by the end of the night. He'll buy all the drinks and drugs he can get, and wait, in a house he hadn't seen in months, wait there for the end.

He breathes in, deeply, once he reaches the door. He takes a moment to look around. He's not going to see this sight again.

He walks in.

Voldemort *knows* as soon as he sees Sirius. His eyes, warm just a second before they harden. His jaw sets, his shoulders draw back.

He must have guessed just by looking at Sirius' face. *How do I look?* Betrayed? Hopeless? Broken? Angry? What expression on his face or in his eyes gave him away so quickly?

Sirius stops in front of him.

"How did you find out?" Voldemort asks, no inflection in his tone.

"James told me."

Now those mesmerising eyes shine with anger. "And how would he know?"

"Dumbledore told him. And, no, I don't know how Dumbledore found out. Well, obviously he knew the prophecy, but I don't know how he found out you decided to act on it now."

It hurts. The pain is starting to pierce through the numbness. It fucking hurts that Dumbledore somehow knew this, and Sirius didn't.

"When were you going to tell me?"

"After it was done," Voldemort spits. "The way you waited to tell me you went on that foolish mission, after you returned."

Sirius blinks at him, unbelieving. “That was a mission- this is someone I care about, a human that-”

“You endangered someone I care about, going on that mission,” Voldemort counters.

Don’t. Don’t tell me you care about me now.

“Go on, then,” Voldemort says. “I know you’ll be difficult about this. Say your piece.”

“Difficult?” The word comes out whispered.

No, he can’t do this to me. His clarity of mind goes to hell, the irrational, foolish hope taking root now that Voldemort is in front of him.

He can’t do this to me.

Not Voldemort, who never hurt Sirius, who’s so gentle with Sirius’ body and with his soul, too.

Impossible.

“I bet if I’d had picked Longbottom, you wouldn’t be so bothered.”

Sirius opens his mouth, closes it again.

He remembers his last visit to his father’s grave, after Voldemort killed that sixteen-year-old and Sirius was conflicted about it.

“You’d still be insane, but sure. Pick Longbottom, and I’ll shut up about it. We can put this behind us.”

He’s no different from Voldemort. From his father and his great grandfather and all those men.

Sirius would *burn down the world*, if that would guarantee the Potters stay safe.

“Always the hypocrite,” Voldemort stands, moves around the desk. “I can kill all the babies I want, as long as it is not your godson.”

“Can you see yourself actually murdering a toddler? Can you envision it? Raising your wand at a one-year-old?”

“Yes.”

So simple.

Voldemort always looks like he has his shit together, controls his temper, appears entirely sane. So much so, that Sirius had lost sight, long ago, that he isn’t.

I’m just as rotten as he is.

Sirius can no longer hide this truth from himself. Voldemort is willing to kill a baby so he can feel safe, to satisfy his paranoia the entire world is against him.

Sirius would kill a baby to save the people he loves. He'd kill *a million* babies for the Potters. He'll never sleep again, he'll probably kill himself after, but he'd do it, he is certain of this. He'd do *anything* for James and Harry.

It doesn't matter that their motivations are different. At the end of the day, he's no better than Voldemort.

"You need not be so worried. I will not kill James or his mudblood. They'll be fine. You can have your little friends. It's just the child I am after."

"They'll be fine? They'd have lost a child! I'd have lost a child!"

"He's one-year-old!" Voldemort snarls. "How can anyone get attached to something that's only been living for a year, doesn't talk, isn't of any use, just lies there and pisses itself? They can have another child, after, if it's so important to them."

Sirius feels the dread mounting in the pit of his stomach.

"Don't do this."

"If I wait until it's less morally reprehensible to you, until the boy is what? Fourteen? Fifteen? Seventeen? Would that make it better? Because it won't be a baby? What difference does it make? You're all illogical. If anything, it would be worse. Surely, you'll all just get more attached to him the longer he lives."

"You don't have to kill him at all." Sirius walks closer, reaches out, lays his hand on Voldemort's chest. "This is madness. I said so before, when I thought your prophesied enemy was just a younger man- but a *baby*? He can't even pull his own trousers, how the fuck do you imagine he's of any threat to you? Don't you realise how this sounds?"

"I know how it sounds," Voldemort assures him. He steps back, retreats from Sirius. "I know a baby can't defeat me, Sirius. I, too, feel it is absurd. But it doesn't matter what I feel. The prophecy-"

"Fuck the fucking prophecy! It's shit! At the very best, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy! You would have to act to get it in motion-"

"It is already in motion." Voldemort is *hiding* from him. All that Sirius loves about him is hidden under this mask he wears now, under the dark lord. "Dumbledore heard it, he decided it was valid, thus setting it in motion. He hid that woman from me, he's guarding the prophecy at the Ministry, he informed his trusted people about it. Clearly, he intends to use these children against me. So they both have to die. I won't give Dumbledore any weapons. If I meet him in battle, he can't have any surprises on his side; if he flees, he can't have some little heroes he can hide behind. Because they are babies now, but they will grow, Sirius. And there's no telling what-"

“They’re nothing special! Regular fucking toddlers! Neither Harry nor Neville showed any sign of magic yet!”

“They can’t become more powerful than I am,” Voldemort says. “I know that. There are no men like me, nor there will ever be. But Dumbledore can use them as a rallying force, as pawns, as-”

“Look, I know he’s not perfect, I know he was shit to you, but it’s fucking *Dumbledore*! I am willing to bet my life he would never use children, in any fucking way, especially to throw them at you, and it will be the most winnable bet I ever made!”

“You don’t know him.”

No, Sirius rather thinks Voldemort doesn’t know him.

These two arseholes that think they know everything about the other, the only ones intelligent enough to understand each other; in truth, they don’t know shit. They’re blinded by opinions they formed decades ago.

Sirius tries again, he tries, he *needs* to try even if he knows…oh, he knows it will not work.

“James said the prophecy claimed the child will be born as summer ends-”

“Yes. Both Potter and Longbottom fit-”

“And so do other hundreds, thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of babies.”

“Not in Britain. They were the only wizards born on that day.”

Sirius feels like pulling at his own hair. “Did the prophecy say they must be born in Britain? No! Did it mention a year of birth? No, just the month-”

“It doesn’t matter. They have to die.”

“And what’s with that shit ‘born of parents that thrice defied you’- when did James and Lily ever defy you? Or Alice and Frank, for that matter-”

“They are fighting against me, they oppose me.”

“Alright, that’s one. Give me two more.”

Voldemort makes a frustrated sound. “I told you, it doesn’t matter. Dumbledore will act on it, and so must I.”

“Dumbledore wasn’t mentioned in the prophecy!”

“I thought you don’t give much importance to what is said in the prophecy. You mocked every line. You don’t believe in it. And that is fine. I waited a year- an entire year, because I don’t- it’s difficult for me to believe it, too. However, it’s out of my hands. My man didn’t

hear all of it, he was thrown out of the bar before he could, so there must be more to it and I will not risk leaving it to chance or to Dumbledore-"

"Stop! Stop with fucking Dumbledore. It is in *your* hands, it always was. Every single decision you make is yours. The world, our world, is in your hands. You don't need this, you don't need to kill any fucking babies!" Sirius' voices cracks, dangerously. He can feel the desperation in it.

His world is shifting, rage battles with pain and loss-

"Please." He begs, for the first time since they have known each other. He walks closer, touches Voldemort again, tries to take his hand. "*Please*, don't."

For a second, Voldemort softens. He looks at Sirius, conflicted. And then it's gone, just like that, his face settles in that blank expression, and he steps back again.

"I have to. I will not risk it. I will not risk my life, in any way."

Sirius knew, but it still hurts to be proven right.

No. *Hurt* is too small of a word.

He never thought much of the phrase 'broken heart', but he actually feels it breaking inside him, this eviscerating pain, this knowledge that it will never be fixed again.

You're done here, his father tells him. *No amount of talking will help. You need to act, now.*

"Who heard the prophecy?"

Dumbledore didn't tell James and Lily, even if they asked.

Voldemort shakes his head-

Sirius gets in his face, and this time, it's not with the intent to touch him, to hold him, to prevent anything.

His anger finally broke through anything else.

"You owe me this much," Sirius snarls. "I want to know who heard the prophecy."

Voldemort looks at him for a handful of seconds. Sirius doesn't even blink.

"Severus."

The laugh that spills out of his mouth makes even Voldemort flinch- perhaps not flinch, but there's a small twitch to his eye.

Sirius can hear how deranged it sounds. He doesn't think he'd laughed like this since he found Marlene's body.

And now, he can focus on something else other than the pain in his chest; he has a goal, something he can control.

“I’ll kill him,” Sirius says, still laughing. “I’ll rip him apart, piece by piece.”

Maybe he’ll flay Snape alive- now he *understands* how Voldemort could have flayed a person, with no remorse, with no empathy.

Oh, how he understands. He’ll do it to Snape, and he’ll like it.

“If you must,” Voldemort allows. “You see, Sirius, I know about needing to kill- I will never begrudge you these desires, nor will I stand in your quest for vengeance. I am the only man you know that will understand and accept, even treasure, every part of you.”

“Yes.”

Sirius finally *sees* it. His family wanting Sirius to act a certain way, pressuring him into it, hounding him, and Voldemort telling Sirius how wrong it is of them to do that.

Dumbledore nagging him, his fucking lectures, his disappointed eyes.

James droning on about morals and doing the right thing.

They wanted Sirius to become the best version of himself, in the way they perceive ‘best’.

Voldemort wants Sirius to become the worst version of himself.

And it was so much easier to listen to his worst impulses, wasn’t it?

“A man does what is right, not what is easy,” his father tells him.

“But how do I know what is right?”

He smiles at Sirius, even if he’s in his death bed, even knowing he will never get up again. His body has become so weak, his face is gaunt and drawn, but his eyes are strong, and his smile is true. His father is the strongest man he’s ever known and Sirius doesn’t understand how this could have happened to him. Sirius doesn’t understand how his father isn’t afraid, how he doesn’t despair at his own terrible fate. Why it doesn’t scare him? How he can smile at Sirius, even if he must be in pain.

“You will know. And I am certain you will face whatever will come your way, unflinchingly. You are my son, Sirius, my first born. My pride.”

Sirius should have always listened to his father, and only his father.

So, even if if he leaves a piece of himself behind, even if it’s hard, Sirius turns around and walks out of the cabin that he grew to call home, without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

This is it!

We saw Sirius at his darkest in this chapter, as he sunk further and further into dark magic, as he excused inexcusable acts.
But now the time has come for him to do what is right.

Please, share your thoughts with me in the comments! This was the most difficult chapter yet, emotionally. ❤️

(Also, I never understood why James and Lily didn't accept Dumbledore as a Secret Keeper, so I tried to come up with something. Same with Voldemort following the prophecy- I rather if he does it because he's paranoid Dumbledore will follow it, and he doesn't actually believe a baby will kill him. Hope it make some sense)

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Not gonna lie to you, this chapter sucks, ok? Prepare for it. It's the worst so far. I intentionally kept it shorter than my other chapters because it drained me, emotionally, to write it.
> Do try to keep in mind, that, eventually, this will have a happy ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I want to know where Snape lives," Sirius demands, as soon as enters the living room.

The Lestranges are entertaining guests, but Sirius doesn't care. They're Death Eater guests, anyway. Yaxley and Rowle.

"Why?" Rodolphus fixes him with his green eyes, darker than Lily's, but they still remind him of her and his stomach tightens with pain.

It keeps coming, in waves, and he'd only just left Voldemort's house minutes before.

"So I can kill him."

Bella isn't looking at him; and that tells Sirius all he needs to know. She knows about the prophecy; she imagines Sirius wants to murder Snape because he just found out he was the one to bring it to Voldemort.

"I don't think so," Rodolphus says. "Let's take this to the office." He stands.

"I don't want to talk, Lestrange. I want Snape's fucking address."

"What happened?" Yaxley asks.

"Get out," Rodolphus orders. "This is a family matter."

Sirius laughs, harshly. *Family matter*. Family should tell family when one's lover-

They should have mentioned it to him, dropped a hint that Voldemort wants to kill Harry.

Yaxley and Rowle don't need to be told twice, leaving with haste.

"Now," Rodolphus starts. "I assume you found out certain things and-"

Sirius takes out his wand. "Give me his address."

"Put that away," Rodolphus advises him.

Sirius takes two quick steps, and them jams his wand into Rodolphus' neck.

"Spinner's End." Bella's voice is small, guilty. "Cokeworth."

Sirius won't look at her.

"I am unsure where, exactly, but it's supposed to be around a mill."

"Have you lost your mind?" Rodolphus snarls at her.

Sirius turns around and marches to the door.

"Let Sirius kill that worthless half-blood. I don't trust him. I don't want him anywhere near us or our lord. I do not trust him, Rodolphus."

"Our lord trusts him."

Sirius doesn't hear the rest of the conversation, nor does he care about it

(-)

Snape's house wasn't hard to find. As ugly, as worthless and disgusting as the man that inhabits it.

Sirius will set it on fire when he's done, do the muggle neighbours a favour, spare them of having to see this hideous sight every day.

Lily used to live close by, too. In a slightly better area, but-

They shouldn't have married. They have nothing in common. Barely middle class, muggleborn Lily with pureblood, rich James.

It was a mistake.

Sirius shouldn't have let James do it.

He rips apart Snape's protective wards, just with his anger, he doesn't even need to cast the necessary charms.

With the door, he doesn't bother with magic. He kicks it open with his shoulder.

A depressing living room welcomes him, muggle and poor.

The living room's worst sin is that it witnessed the vermin inside it, allowed that little hideous creature sit on a couch, toddle around, grow up, instead of killing him, early on.

And there he is, coming out of a door, as ugly and repulsive as ever.

Long before, Snape could hold his own against Sirius, when very few fellow students managed.

Snape is quick, smart, knowledgeable with his curses.

But Sirius had the best tutors in the world growing up, he had his father, the picture of wizarding excellency, as opposed to Snape's muggle father.

Sirius spent his last years training with Voldemort, and the last many months doing it daily.

Snape doesn't have a chance. But he does put up enough of a fight to help with Sirius' insane levels of adrenaline, only rising ever since he heard the news.

It's the first time he casts the Cruciatus, not just for training, but meaning it with all his heart. It feels like a balm over the wounds inside him. Snape's screams feel like *justice*.

"You should have died in that shack. You should have been eaten alive by a werewolf. By the time I'm done with you, you'll wish you had, Snivellus. It was James that saved you, you pathetic excrement."

Snape attempts to move, even if he's trembling from head to toe, but Sirius slams his boot on the right side of his face, squishing it against the floor.

"You sent Voldemort after him, after the man who saved your life. After the woman that made sure we stopped taking the piss out of you in our last year, a woman that, to this day, refuses to speak badly of you."

"I didn't know," Snape's voice is distorted, what with Sirius' boot on his jaw, what with the tears, and the breathlessness and the blood pouring out of his abnormally large nose. "I didn't know, how could I have known? I didn't even know she was pregnant!"

Snape sounds in so much pain, and while Sirius certainly caused him a great deal of it, there's something in that desperate, horrified tone that resonates with the pain inside Sirius.

The pain of knowing your best friend, your everything, your moral compass will die soon.

"You have to help her," Snape goes on, and his potion stained fingers curl around Sirius' leather clad ankle, not to push his foot away, but clinging to it. "You have to help her, you will! You'll help Potter, I know you will!"

Snape is begging, and in all the years they've known each other, Snape never begged, never pleaded, with those proud eyes of his, as if he had any right to pride, the greasy worm.

But now he's trying to look up to Sirius, he's begging-

"You're the one that told Dumbledore Voldemort chose Harry." Sirius understands right then, and he removes his boot. "You betrayed Voldemort, the second he told you it's going to be Lily's son. You ran to Dumbledore, didn't you?"

“I did! I’ll do anything! I begged our lord to spare her life, but I - he -I don’t trust that he would. So I told Dumbledore, I begged him to protect her, I promised I’d do anything-”

Sirius laughs. “No one can protect her, Snape.”

Deep down, Sirius knows this to be true. Had known it since James said *‘Voldemort is coming after Harry’*.

“You signed her death sentence.”

He raises his wand.

“NO!”

Sirius is so shocked to hear a woman’s voice, that he doesn’t react in time.

He just can’t believe there’s a *woman* in Snape’s house.

Ah. An older woman, that doesn’t attack Sirius, even if she had him surprised for a second. Doesn’t even pull her wand. Instead, she throws herself over Snape.

Good gods, she’s even uglier than he is.

His mother, then.

Rationally, Sirius knew Snape had parents, of course he did. But to see it-

To see proof Snape wasn’t hatched, but born, that he has a mother, throws Sirius off.

There’s a pathetic struggle on the floor, between a frail, weak, rail thin woman, and a weak, tortured, rail thin Snape. They’re fighting for the honour of who gets to stand in front of Sirius’ wand.

Instantly, Sirius understands this isn’t the first time they had this issue. They seem very familiar with this struggle; and there’s the way the woman didn’t attempt to attack Sirius, rather just trying to protect Snape, the way she holds a hand up, over her face-

Oh. Sirius isn’t the first man to fuck Snape up, and this is not the first time his mother tries to stop it.

He takes another look around the poverty around him, those cracked walls with chipped paint.

There’s no picture of a man, no portrait of Snape’s muggle father.

He lowers his wand. He can’t kill a woman that cowers in front of him.

He can’t kill a mother’s son in front of her.

He just can’t do it.

“You will live, so you can be here to suffer the consequences of what you’ve done.”

“The boy!” Snape yells after him, when Sirius turns around. “They trust you- Black, take the boy, bring him to our lord. This is the only way Lily -Potter- can survive this- Black!”

Sirius didn’t think Snape could disgust him more, but it happens. His stomach rolls with nausea, with hatred and revulsion, and a voice whispers, sweet and convincing: *‘he’s not wrong’*.

How will I live with this? How will I live with having thought this, even for a second?

“It seems you put your faith in Voldemort, in Dumbledore, and now in me,” Sirius says, laughing. “You’re really scarping the bottom of the barrel here, Snape. You’re scrambling. But it’s in vain. One of these days, you’ll wake up to learn she’s dead, and nothing you will do in your life will absolve you of it.”

(-)

Will he kill me? Sirius wonders, leaning on the wall of James’ house.

Sirius can’t imagine Voldemort killing him, but then his brain is clearly defective when it comes to Voldemort. *Naive.*

He wouldn’t have imagined Voldemort would do *this*, either.

He will, eventually. Perhaps he’ll try to persuade me, first. Capture me. Try to charm me again. But when nothing will work, he will kill me.

The Secret will rest with him, for eternity, but eventually James and Lily will have to leave the house, to find food if Sirius is no longer alive to bring them supplies. And if they leave the house, they will get caught, eventually.

At least I can buy them more time; perhaps Dumbledore can come up with a plan for them, if James and Lily have some time to *think*.

A year? Two? How long can I buy them?

Will he torture me?

No.

Yes.

No.

Sirius throws the fag away. He runs a hand over his face, and goes inside the house.

Remus already left.

Peter is still there, pacing. He startles when Sirius enters, goes chalk white, but then he relaxes a tad when he sees it's only Sirius.

Lily is where he last saw her, on the couch, clinging to Harry. At least Harry fell asleep.

"You found the book?" James asks, pacing himself.

What?

Oh, right, he told them he's going after a book.

"Yes. All good. I've read about the charms again, refreshed my memory."

He knows the charms for Fidelius since the war started, always a plan of his, always there, for James, just in case they needed it to keep James safe.

"I'm ready. Peter, you should go."

Peter's unshed tears fall now. He wipes them with his sleeve, but they just keep coming.

"Yes. Alright. I- yes."

James goes to him, hugs him fiercely. "It will be alright, mate."

That's James. Even at a time like this, he will still find it in himself to assure his friends, to encourage them, to think of their feelings.

"We'll see each other again, yeah? We will. Just stay safe, Pete."

"James," Peter's voices comes muffled, spoken into James' robe. "James-"

"It will be alright. Love you, Wormtail. Stay safe, yeah? Promise me."

"I promise," Peter whispers. "You stay safe, and-"

James draws back, clasps his hands on Peter's shoulder. "Me? Sirius has my back. I wager I'll be the safest man in Britain, yeah? No need to worry." He tries for a smile. "Now, say good bye to Harry and Lily. For the moment."

Peter's face is a mess of tears and snot. He keeps trying to wipe it off, with no success. He's trembling hard when he approaches Lily.

He stops awkwardly, a feet away from them. "See you… see you later Lily," he hiccups. "You and Harry. Just- take care of James…" His voice breaks again.

Sirius walks, pats him on the back. "Go, Peter."

"And you?" Peter sobs now. "What will you do? Will I see you-"

“Yes. We’ll talk later. Go home.”

“Sirius.” Peter’s eyes are desperate, and they hold the same knowledge Sirius’ holds.

This will end in death and devastation all around.

‘Peter is a pessimist,’ James says. ‘*Always worrying about the worst.’*

Peter is a realist, Sirius thinks.

It’s very easy to see that Peter believes Sirius will die over this.

Voldemort is not known for having his plans thwarted. And Peter doesn’t even have the delusions Sirius has, that Voldemort will hesitate because of all those nights they spent together, all those meals, all those songs.

After I’m dead, they’ll have to go to Dumbledore. James will be too numb and in pain to protest anymore.

“No. I’m sorry. I can’t,” Lily says, standing, breaking the moment Sirius and Peter were having.

They all turn to stare at her.

“I can’t. No.”

“Lily,“ James whispers.

She watches Sirius, full of so many emotions her green eyes are cloudy. “I’m sorry, Sirius. I *can’t*. If it were just my life, or James’ but- but I can’t gamble Harry’s.”

Lily doesn’t trust him. It’s been evident for a while now, little signs, here and there, little questions that sounded too sharp. Sirius tried so hard to dismiss it, but there’s no dismissing this.

Can you blame her?

“He’s my best friend! My brother!” James is yelling now, and Harry wakes, starts crying. “He’d never betray me!”

“I can’t take that chance. I can’t.” She turns to James. “You don’t know him as well as you think.”

Peter blinks, shocked, the tears startled out of him. He looks unbelieving.

Sirius can’t quite believe it either.

“He’s back with his family, he’d stopped drinking, he’s seeing that Death Eater man- James, *look at him*,” Lily begs. “All those nights we couldn’t reach him, the way he avoids any talk

of war. He claims he stopped fighting, but that's not the Sirius we know. Sirius would never stop fighting- so, maybe he is still fighting. Just not for our-"

"Enough!" James screams at her. "Enough! Have you lost your mind entirely?"

"He has a Dark Mark on his arm!"

"Because-"

"I can't risk my son's life!"

I lost everything. James,Voldemort, Bella.

"You're not risking anything! It's Sirius! *Sirius*! He would never betray me."

"I'm not that sure," Lily says, and that's the end of it, isn't it?

The Fidelius won't work if there is not full trust between them. It won't take hold.

Sirius turns around; Peter tries to hold him back, by his arm, but Sirius snatches it away.

"Sirius, no! Stay, let us talk it over, she's just nervous!" James calls after him.

Sirius doesn't stop, marching to the door, chocked with anger and pain, and this *ugly monster* that is born of both. He looks over his shoulder at Lily.

"You'll lose everything," he spits at her. "And just now I wouldn't mind it so much if you weren't dragging James with you."

"Sirius!"Jame's voice is just as broken as Sirius'.

"This is what happens when you marry a mudblood," Sirius spits, and then he's out the door, and he slams it behind him with full force, but not before he catches one last glimpse of James' stricken face.

(-)

"They had me do it," Peter says, sitting stiffly in Sirius' empty living room.

Sirius takes a long gulp straight out of the bottle. His third bottle.

He hates every floorboard, every window, everything about this cold, foreign house. He hates it because it's not Voldemort's cabin.

"They should have went with Remus," he says, staring at a spider weaving a web.

'I will not hold well under torture,' Peter once told him.

“They should have went with you,” Peter retorts. “Lily is acting stupid.”

No, Lily is acting like a sensible mother. An observant woman. Now that the anger passed, dulled into visceral pain, Sirius can’t truly blame her for not trusting him, for her not knowing him enough to understand that while he’s been doing awful shit lately, he would never get James killed.

He takes another long drink. “I called her a mudblood.” He had, hadn’t he?

One day, you’ll look back on it, and you’re realise those were the last words you said to her.

To James.

“James knows how you act when you’re in pain; he knows you hurt back. That you didn’t mean it.”

They spend a long time in silence. It’s heavy and stifling and both avoid looking at each other.

When this is all over, Sirius will lose Peter too, in one way or another.

Fuck Lily; fuck me, for making her not trust me. Fuck Voldemort and Snape and that fucking prophecy.

“I’ll be going then,” Peter says, eventually. “I- they decided I shouldn’t hide. That I should keep living home. Not that I could have left, mind you, what with mum. James said everyone in the world will think you’re the Secret Keeper, so I should act like I have nothing to hide.”

Sirius takes another swing from his bottle. It empties, so he throws it away.

Peter stands, makes his way to the door.

“Wormtail.”

Peter turns.

“Be careful,” Sirius begs. He turns his head and finally looks at his friend.

He hasn’t begged so much in one night since…*ever*.

Peter holds his gaze. There are no more tears. “You know, Lily didn’t want me to tell you I did the charm. She still wanted Dumbledore to be the Secret Keeper, but agreed to me eventually. Because James said, and I quote *‘no one would ever suspect it’*.” He laughs, broken and bitter. “Small, stupid, cowardly Peter, right?”

“Pete,” Sirius warns.

“No one paid me any mind in our first year. James barely glanced at me, Remus was busy with his self loathing and fear- but they were looking at you. You shine so brightly, Sirius.

Everyone was looking at you. James would prank me-bully me, really- just to amuse you, to show you he's all cool. But you weren't amused."

Sirius closes his eyes.

"You came and sat with me in class when no one else did. You let me trail after you. Helped with my homework. You took me under your wing and no one bullied me again. Not James, not the Slytherins. I asked you, I came to you and found the courage to ask you why you were giving me the time of the day. Because you're a bully too, you had no issues taking the piss out of everyone but James. You remember what you told me?"

Sirius opens his eyes, and a new bottle. "No," he lies. "It's in the past. We were eleven. It doesn't matter anymore."

Peter lingers in the doorway for a few more seconds. "You should hide, Sirius. People will still think it's you. They've put you in danger, Lily put you in danger without even giving you the respect of trusting you."

The knob twists, a rush of wind comes in- Sirius waves his hand and the door closes, locks, keeping Peter in.

He can smell the fear; Padfoot can smell Wormtail is terrified.

Sirius stands slowly, the house spinning around him. He makes his way to Peter, and when they're toe to toe, he reaches out. For an awful second that would have shattered his heart if it wasn't already in pieces, Sirius is reaching out for Peter's left arm, but at the last moment he changes his mind and pulls him into a hug.

They stay like that for a handful of moments, Sirius resting his chin on Peter's head.

He feels like crying; he felt like crying since hours ago, but this time he is devastatingly close to actually doing it.

Sirius lets him go. He doesn't check his left arm, because he refuses to look at Peter the way everyone looked at Sirius. With that awful distrust.

Lily's green eye hurt the most; Remus' hazel. To be looked at like that by the people he would have died for…no. He won't do that to Peter, who stood by him when James and Remus turned their backs on him, for thoughtlessly endangering the life of the very man that's now responsible for all this.

Peter draws back, stares up at him. He looks more determined than Sirius has ever seen him.

He bares his left arm, and it's unblemished, no sign of the Mark.

"If something happens to me," Peter says. "Take care of my mum."

"Your mum will always be taken care of." Sirius probably won't live long enough to do it, but he'll leave orders that someone should see to it. "I swear-"

“You don’t need to swear. I *know* you, Sirius.”

He unlocks the door, and he watches Peter’s retreating back until he’s out of the wards and Dissaparates.

“Careful, James and Remus won’t like it if they see you talking to me,” Sirius warns when Peter approaches him.

“Fuck’ em,” Peter huffs, sitting beside Sirius. He unfolds an umbrella, charming it to float above them, shielding them from rain, even if they’re already drenched.

Sirius has lost track of time, watching the Black lake, alone with his thoughts, thinking of his father's last moments of consciousness.

Next, Peter pulls out a sandwich for Sirius, who hadn’t gone to the Great Hall since the incident with Snape, a couple of days prior.

He isn’t hungry, anyway.

He shakes his head, but Peter forces the sandwich in his lap.

“Remember what you told me, back in our first year, when I asked you what you see in me? Why you want me as a friend?”

Sirius throws a pebble into the lake. He rather wishes he’d go into it and never come back.

In the span of a month, he lost his father to illness, his mother to her spite, Bella to Voldemort, his brother to cowardice and now James and Remus to his own recklessness.

“No.” Sirius truly doesn’t.

Peter hands him a flask of pumpkin juice next, and one of coffee. He also fishes Sirius’ fags out of his very accommodating satchel. Sirius left them in his dorm, but he hadn’t been in his dorm since that night.

He’s been sleeping in the dungeons. So far, no one protested to his presence.

“You told me you saw yourself in me. And I laughed, because look at you and look at me. Worlds apart. I said as much. You grabbed my shoulder and said, ‘neither of us belongs in Gryffindor. We’re both snakes in the lion's den.’”

Peter confessed the Hat had wanted to place him in Slytherin, too. But Peter was too afraid of what the Slytherins would do to him, because he was poor and chubby and form a very new family, even if both his parents were purebloods.

Peter told the Hat he aspires to be better, he wants to have friends; he wants to try being brave.

Sirius never truly grew into his Gryffindor colours, and neither had Peter.

Can I truly expect him to die for Harry? Is that fair?

He has an image playing in his head, Voldemort and Peter in the same room together, and it's horrific. The fake Voldemort, the one that pretended to care for Sirius would be bad enough, but it will be the *real* Voldemort, with his wand out, pointed at Peter-

He's my friend, too, not just James.

Yet- James is James, Sirius decides. As much as they said they're all friends, all four of them- they were. But James and Sirius, they were always more than that; they are brothers, if not in blood, then in soul.

(-)

He can't wait to get this over with, so he can get smashed again. Not that he's sober, but at least he's coherent when he goes to Grimmauld.

Everyone waits for him in the library.

They know already. Cygnus would know, and he clearly told everyone else.

They're all silent, watching him attentively.

"I've parted ways with Voldemort," he says.

Regulus looks pissed. A muscle is jumping in his jaw.

His grandfather and mother show no expression.

"What would you have us do?" his grandfather asks.

Sirius summons Dobby, waits to be served a glass of firewhiskey. His mother doesn't ask for one. She appears perfectly sober.

He's unbelieving they're actually asking him what to do; in theory, they should, he is their Head, but-

This is so important, so delicate. It could end their family. Yet they look at him for an answer.

"Grandfather, can you get two passes out of the country? I know the borders are closed, but is there any way-"

"Depends for who, and for what, and where they are headed."

"Mother and Regulus. For Egypt."

"What? I'm not going to-"

“Shut up,” his grandfather orders, and Regulus glares at him, but his grandfather glares back and that ends the resistance.

“Yes. For them, I could. I will ask my old friend to send Regulus an invitation to attend the Institute. My friend, the President of Egypt. Even our embarrassing Minister cannot refuse a formal invitation from a foreign head of state, especially since our family has a long history of attending the Institute. There is nothing suspicious there. I can do it.”

Something relaxes inside him. At least that- at least his mother and Regulus will be safe.

“The term started in September!” Regulus protests.

“It’s only October,” Cygnus spits. “This isn’t Hogwarts, it is a prestigious Institute, filled with adult witches of wizards, of high intelligence and skill. You are one of those, and you will catch up,”

“But-”

“Silence, Regulus,” his grandfather demands. “I will have the passes by tomorrow evening.”

“Go and pack your bags,” Sirius tells his brother and mother.

Regulus fumes, opens his mouth again, but his mother stands, and she grabs Regulus, hauling him after her.

Unusually obedient of her.

“Go on,” Cygnus invites Sirius. “What’s next?”

“He will win,” Sirius says. “And we had a good plan, a plan that would serve our family well. I don’t know if it can be done, if he’s reasonable enough to work with you, Grandfather, now that I am not there to- I don’t know if he would, but in case he does…” His fingers shake as he refills his glass. “This is between him and I. I don’t want you getting involved. Bella is with him, heart and soul-”

“We can get her back, if we need to, if you decide you want us to go to war with him.”

Sirius blinks. War. With Voldemort.

We’re already at war, he almost says, There’s already a war.

But this would be a different type of war.

One that will end in the destruction of the Twenty Eight, or at least the Houses that will join House Black in this hopeless battle.

“How would you accomplish that?” his grandfather asks Cygnus, eyebrow raised. “She is completely devoted to that thing.”

“I know how to rile him up. I know, better than most, where to push, what would hurt him the most, to the point that temper he tries to keep in check around us older men would shatter. If I commit to it, I think I can get him to turn his wand on me. Torture, kill- matters not. If he raises his wand at me, Bella will leave him. She will return home, and you can have her on your side.” He smiles, ruefully, annoyed and proud. “Even if he kills me, she’s a better soldier than I, in any case, she’s more powerful than most men I know. She will serve you better than I could.”

Sirius stares at him.

“I don’t need friends. I have family. I don’t have to like Alphard and Cygnus. I have a duty to love them and protect them, and they have a duty to do the same for me.”

Sirius gets it, now. He gets it.

“No,” Sirius prohibits it. “This is …personal. I won’t drag you into it, I won’t risk our entire family for a personal issue. He will win, there is no doubt about this, he practically won already, and I know that even if you both- or at least you, Grandfather- despise him, I know you want the world he promised. So I think it’s best if you support him, going forward.”

More silence. A prolonged one.

Finally, his grandfather nods. “It shall be as you say; unless he touches a single hair on your head. Then, it is war.”

He wouldn’t, that naive part of Sirius still survives. The part of him that felt so cherished by Voldemort, so safe around him.

He’d kill you and think nothing of it, the newly awoken part of him reminds him.

“But he won’t,” his grandfather continues. “We had a chat already.”

Cygnus closes his eyes for a second, then looks at Grandfather with respect and exasperation.

“You *what*?” Sirius asks.

“Yesterday, after I was informed you…’parted ways’; that he is apparently intent on killing your charge. I impressed upon him the reality that if you are hurt, all hells will break loose. I reminded him Blacks never opposed him- we might not have supported him, publicly, staunchly, but we never opposed him. I made sure he understands it isn’t in his best interest for that to happen. Oh, he might win, in the end, I admitted to that. But he will rule over ashes, because we are not mudbloods and muggle loving, soft-hearted fools, that don’t even know how to Apparate. We are Blacks. We go down, everything goes down with us.”

“And he didn’t lose his mind?” Cygnus looks unbelieving. “He let you threaten him, in the mood he’s in these days, more unstable than ever, and you got to walk away, unharmed?”

His grandfather scoffs. “You are all in awe of him; even you, Cygnus. Even you became so convinced of his might, to the point you forgot who *I* am. Thankfully, unstable as he is, he seemed to remember it. He seemed to understand that if he strikes me down in Lestrange’

house, when I went to him in peace, he will lose most of his supporters. I don't think he is keen on finding out how far he gets with his werewolves and vampires and gods know what other lowly creatures would follow him even if he kills a Black."

He's right. Sirius forgot this, too. He saw Voldemort as a god, above all mortals, but that motherfucker made him forget where he comes from. Made him forget no one, not even gods, are better than Blacks.

"Thank you," Sirius whispers, "I- thank you, Grandfather. Though it was unnecessary, I am not afraid of him."

Voldemort can't hurt him now. He already did. He broke Sirius in pieces. Nothing more he can do to him, nothing worse. Even if he ends up torturing Sirius for a Secret Sirius doesn't even have- that won't be worse than the betrayal.

"So, we move forward, as planned, at his side? As a family, I mean," Cygnus says. "Until you and him settle this…dispute."

"It won't be settled," Sirius assure him. "But yes. Move forward. I am not going to Dumbledore, or to the Ministry. I am not fighting against you, or any other Death Eater. Spread that around, Cygnus. I support your cause, I simply am honour bound to protect my charge."

"Wise way to go about it," his Grandfather praises him.

"But you'd have followed me if I made the wrong choice, too."

"Of course. We are also duty bound to follow our Head of House."

Don't cry now.

He avoided crying so far, entirely.

Now would be the worst moment to do it.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Cygnus, you may leave us. I wish to have a word with Sirius in private."

Cygnus obeys.

"Is Potter worth it, Sirius?" His grandfather asks, when they're alone. "Is Potter worth all this?"

"Harry is my -"

"He isn't. We both know it."

Sirius stares at him.

“How would you know?”

“Nothing that affects this family goes past me.”

“Don’t give me that shit! Tell me who-”

“Bellatrix.”

“And who told Bellatrix?”

“Voldemort.”

Ah.

“She, too, protested at the idea, I am told. When Voldemort decided what *baby* to kill-” his grandfather’s nose wrinkles in distaste- “she reminded him the boy is under the protection of our family. So he informed her that is not true. That the mudblood wouldn’t allow you. That you, Potter, and Pettigrew lied about it.”

It’s all Sirius’ fault for telling Voldemort everything. *But how could I have known?* In what scenario could he have guessed Voldemort would kill a baby, any baby, much less Harry?

“So, I ask you again, is Potter worth risking Voldemort’s wrath? To the point you still feel the need to send your mother and brother away to safety?”

“You don’t understand friends, with all due respect. Yes, he is worth it.”

“Worth more than your family?”

Sirius tries, he tries so hard, but-

It’s not safe to cry with others. Yet it was always safe to cry with his father. This man is not his father, but he is a Black. He is a father figure. He is his father’s father.

The tears finally come. He hides, anyway, hides his face in his hands. “It’s not just about James. It’s about me. I-” A sob wrecks him, makes him shake with pain. “I gave Voldemort everything. Things he didn’t deserve, I-*everything*, Grandfather. And he betrayed me.”

When Sirius cried, as a little boy, his father would gather him in his arms, kiss him, soothe him.

Sirius cried less and less as he grew, but even as old as sixteen, when his father was dying- he cried, then. His father wiped away his tears, clasped a hand on his back.

His grandfather does no such thing. He doesn’t know how to console someone, how to show gentleness. From all Sirius discovered, mostly from the women in his family, when his father was a little boy, it was his mother that was gentle with him, that comforted him.

Everyone said his father was very close to Grandmother Melania, that they had an incredible bond. Sirius remembers her fondly, a warm woman, even if as imposing looking as the rest. But her smiles were always softer, her hands gentle, her words soothing.

And while Sirius' mother didn't like her, as she didn't like anyone, when grandmother Melania visited, the perpetually scornful Walburga Black was exceedingly polite with her mother-in-law.

One of the hard limits his father had, one of the things he wouldn't suffer from his wife, or anyone. No one was allowed to upset his own mother or treat her badly.

Sirius remembers when she died. One day, when they came down for breakfast, their father wasn't there, and that never happened- his father missed dinners sometimes, but never breakfast, unless he was out of the country. Yet they knew he wasn't out of the country, so Regulus and Sirius immediately understood something was happening.

"Your grandmother Melania died last night," their mother told them.

She hugged Regulus when he started crying. She even rubbed Sirius' shoulder, awkwardly.

"These will be hard days, we must prepare for the funeral, for guests. Boys, I want you to behave. Your father - you need to be a source of comfort for him, yes? Sirius, please do your best not to upset him."

Yet his father didn't seem upset when he returned home. He didn't cry, he didn't look like he lost his mother, the person he loved so much, by all accounts.

They brought her body home to Grimmauld, and his father stood vigil at the head of the casket, for an entire day and night, as people came and went, to pay their respect.

He thanked them all, he exchanged words with all of them, and when he smiled at Narcissa, who brought him a painting she made of the woman, there were no cracks in his smile.

Sirius had to stay at his side, for most of the day, as his Heir, between his father and Grandfather. He had trouble keeping in the tears, and he was already old enough that he wasn't allowed to cry with strangers there, so he kept having to leave, here and there.

At night, though, no more people came.

It was just his father and grandfather there, in complete silence, so Sirius started crying. He went to the casket, elevated on a tall table, and stood on his toes, so he could touch his grandmother's hand, one last time.

She was cold, and it only made him cry harder.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it," he told his father when he simply couldn't stop crying.

The man moved from the spot he was glued to all day, came and hugged Sirius. *"It's alright to mourn her, Sirius."*

Sirius looked at his stoic face and almost asked *'Then why aren't you sad? Why aren't you mourning? Why isn't grandfather?'*

It was only years later that Sirius realised, with Melania dead, there was no one left to comfort his father. That if he was sad, or upset, there was no one left to console him.

His father's lovers started showing up shortly after she died, Sirius knows as much. He didn't put it together then, but when he grew older, he realised it wasn't a coincidence. That his father probably wanted some womanly softness, that nurturing energy, and his wife could never offer such a thing.

It wasn't just about sex, Sirius thinks. If it were just that, then probably no one would have learned of his father affairs. But no, his father had them over, months on end, at the country manor. Other times, he bought them houses, and he'd go there. He'd always exchange them for another, eventually, but it was never just sex, it was always more than that, and Sirius remembers watching from his window at Black Manor, seeing those women sitting in his Father's lap, as he read the newspaper, asking him how his day went, smiling and touching him.

Sirius himself liked the women, because they were kind. They were motherly. They treated Sirius so well. One of his favourite, Mrs Brown, had a child of her own, a girl four years younger than Sirius.

And on the rare weekends Sirius begged hard enough to go with his Father, pleaded with him not to leave him home, and his father took him along, Mrs Brown paid as much attention to Sirius as she did to her daughter. She fussed over them equally, played with both, and it felt so nice to run up to her and have her pay attention to him, to whatever idiocy was crossing his mind. It felt lovely to play Quidditch, on his own, score goals, and have Mrs Brown watch from below, applaud and cheer for him when the Quaffle went through the goal post.

Once, he was so upset he couldn't live with them full time, that he always had to return to Grimmalud, that he yelled at his own mother he'd rather have Mrs Brown as a mother.

Sirius wonders where she is, these days. She lasted the longest. She was one of the first. After her, women lasted less and less, and they got younger and younger. They were all wonderful with Sirius, but, as he grew, he started being angry with them. With his father, too.

He never voiced these feelings, but his father stopped mentioning the women, stopped taking him along. And once Sirius started Hogwarts, that was that. Sirius liked Black Manor, it was his favourite in the summers, and he would spend most of his holidays there. There was no woman. Just him, and Regulus and his parents, or several relatives.

They never spoke of his father's affairs after that, but Sirius would hear about them, anyway. When he was in his fourth year, he heard from Rabastan that his father was seeing a woman that was only six years older than Sirius, and he remembers how wrong that felt, to know it, to have everyone in their circles know it.

Yet he came home to his wife when he was sick. Sirius doesn't understand why; if he were in his father's place, he'd have went to one of those women that showed him affection and

tenderness, not to a scorned, spiteful wife.

“You won’t forget this,” his grandfather says, after a few *awkward* minutes, once Sirius manages to stop the tears. “A Black doesn’t forget nor forgive such a betrayal. Voldemort is not the man to strike back at, not easily, but no matter what happens in the future, you must never forgive or forget that he wronged you.”

“Oh, I won’t,” Sirius assures him, hastily wiping the tears off.

“You have a forgiving heart. I always said you are soft, and you don’t like to hear it, but it is true. You forgive those you…cherish, even unforgivable acts.”

“Not this.”

“Remember it, always. Let it serve as yet another lesson that you cannot place your trust in outsiders. Not in Voldemort, not in the Potters, who repaid your devotion and kindness with distrust, who refused the honour of having their son under your magical protection. I hope you learned, once and for all, that you only count on your family. Imagine, for a second, if you haven’t returned home- Voldemort would still have went after the Potters, and what would you have done then? You’d be all alone. No doubt you think this is a tragedy, that you will lose everything, dramatic as you are. But you have your family, Sirius, you returned to us, and we will always have your back. You will never be alone, no matter what happens to those blood traitors and mudbloods and half-bloods and whoever else you call friends. You might lose them, but you will never lose us. Now, you should live here, at Grimmauld. I do hope Voldemort truly understood he is not to harm you, but he clearly has moments of lunacy, and a disastrous, emotional decision-making process, so who knows when he’ll be tempted, lost to reason, to try to force you to reveal the Secret. Return to Grimmauld, feed the blood wards, and after a couple of weeks they shall grow as strong as they had been when Orion was alive. If you do that, not even Voldemort would be able to smash through our defences, even if he lost his mind enough to dare to attack Grimmauld.”

“I’m not the Secret Keeper,” Sirius says, because this is his grandfather. Sirius is certain of very few things these days, but he is certain of this. Whatever he says to his grandfather in confidence will never leave the room. “Lily didn’t trust me.”

His grandfather sighs. “Stupid mudblood.”

“She has her reason. I am- was- with Voldemort. She could sense it.”

“Well, no matter why, this is good news. You won’t be involved.”

“It’s not good news. They’ll die!” Sirius screams. “Peter will die, too, horribly at that.”

“Pettigrew? That mousy little thing? They trusted him over you?” His grandfather looks bewildered, for once. “Then they truly deserve their fate. And yes, it is good news. For me. For our family. I’m sure it will devastate you, but you’ll recover eventually.”

“I will never recover if they die!”

When they die.

His grandfather stands. “I buried my wife of half a century. I buried my son. I lost my daughter. I assure you, Sirius, one recovers from anything, with time.”

It’s a lie; his grandfather never recovered from losing his son.

(-)

“Why aren’t you packing?” Sirius asks her.

He finds her in his old room. Sirius went to talk to Regulus, but his brother didn’t open the door. When he turned, he noticed the door to his old room was open.

She’s sitting on the bed, holding one of his Gryffindor scarves.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Mother-”

She stands, regally, and it only takes her a few steps to reach him. She touches his face. “I’m not leaving you alone, Sirius. You can order it, Orion can come back from the grave and demand it, the gods themselves can scream at me in rage, but there is no force on earth that will make me leave. I am staying.”

Sirius swallows. “It’s useless. I can’t stay here, because it would take a few weeks for the wards to grow strong again. I won’t risk having Voldemort come after me while I’m here. I’ll be in my house -”

“This is your-”

“My *other* house.”

“I’ll come with you, then.”

“No.”

Her eye twitches, but she doesn’t scream. “Then I will stay here. At least I will be close to you.”

“Go with Regulus; he’ll be alone and pissed off, in a foreign country.”

“He’ll be safe. It’s time he stands on his own two feet.”

“I don’t want you here. I want you far away from Voldemort, for the foreseeable future.”

“I wanted you far away from him, too. You didn’t listen-”

“Are you really going to serve me *‘I told you so’* speech now?”

“I’m telling you I am staying. I won’t run out of my own home, abandon my first born to his fate, just because a filthy mudblood wants to kill a baby.”

“Mum,” Sirius begs.

Her fingers press against the back of his neck, until he bends, and she kisses his forehead.

“I always loved you more,” she whispers in his ear. “More than Regulus, more than myself, more than Orion. The moment they placed you in my arms was the brightest, happiest moment of my life. I don’t like you sometimes, I see too much of myself in you, too much of Orion, you’re impossibly rude and stubborn, and your father allowed me to spoil Regulus, to treat him how I wished, because he wasn’t the Heir, he wasn’t meant to grow into a powerful position, it didn’t matter if I ‘ruined’ Regulus, turned him ‘weak’, but I always loved you more.”

She places both of her hands on his face. “It ripped me apart to see you leaving us behind; it hurt, Sirius, it hurt so terribly. I know I wasn’t a good mother to you, but if you have any mercy left in your soul, then you won’t make me have to bury you. I wouldn’t survive it.”

She kisses him again, and then she lets him go, walks right past him.

(-)

At night, when he cries on his hard floors, curled around himself, he takes the ring out of his nightstand and keeps it in his fist, without putting it on.

Voldemort touches the Gaunt ring and it springs to life, sends a spark of pleasure and longing through Sirius’ hand, right up to his heart.

“You should take it off once in a while. When we’re inside the house, you could -”

“No.” Sirius snatches his hand away, protectively.

He rests his forehead on a cold shoulder. “Do you miss it?” he asks, kissing Voldemort’s collarbone.

“No.”

“It misses you,” Sirius whispers. “It wants back to you. Every time you touch it, it yearns for you.”

Voldemort combs his fingers through Sirius’ hair. “You’re imagining it.”

(-)

“So much for standing with me,” Sirius slurs, when Bella enters his house.

He’s lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling, getting rid of spiders with the Killing Curse.

He feels awful enough as it is, he doesn’t need his body to start going through the process of recovering from dark magic, which would happen if he stops using it. It’s a tough process, as he knows, and he refuses to go through it.

“I said I won’t let anyone hurt you. Are you hurt?” She scuffs, staring down at him.

“Of course I’m-”

“Not your little precious feelings, Sirius. I was referring to *real* harm, and I still mean it. No one will hurt you.”

“Oh, yeah? And how do you imagine Voldemort will get the Secret out of me? By asking nicely?”

“You’re an idiot, Sirius. You’re a fucking idiot. Putting yourself through all this for some half-blooded whelp…”

“Voldemort is a half-blood.”

She kicks him in his side, her heel sinking into his flesh.

“Throwing away a good thing, a wonderful thing we all had, for fucking Potter. You moron! We were almost at the end, we had it all, but no, you had to throw a fucking tantrum.”

“I ruined it? He’s out there trying to kill babies, Bellatrix. Because of a *prophecy*. Look me in the eyes and tell me you find nothing ridiculous about that.”

Bella scoffs again, but she doesn’t meet Sirius’ eyes. “I expressed my own reservation on the topic to the dark lord.”

“But he didn’t listen. Because he doesn’t care about any of us. He thinks us all stupid, so far beneath him we can’t even give our opinions.”

“However odd it sounds to us, he knows better. He is wiser than any man, so I shall not question his will. If he considers this important, then it is.”

“It’s a baby!”

Her jaw twitches. “It is his will. I will not question it.”

“What are you doing here, then, you spineless bitch?” Sirius snarls, standing, towering over her. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I came to check on you,” she says, unimpressed with his looming.

He laughs. “Why? You don’t really care about me, Bella. Not when you keep hurting me, fucking me over, again and again. Stop pretending you love me.”

“You won’t provoke me into a fight. I understand you’re angry. I do love you, you fool-”

“You love your lord more.”

“I follow him because of my convictions. Because I trust him, I believe in him, and he will change our world. He won us the war. But I love no one as I love my family. That doesn’t mean I will disrespect my lord because your feelings are hurt, Sirius.”

“I won’t forgive you-”

“When did I hear that before?” she mocks, and he grabs her throat tightly.

She rolls her eyes.

“Forgive me for what, Sirius? What are you expecting me to do, exactly? Challenge the dark lord for a duel? Abandon him and my *husband*? For Potter? Is that what you expect of me?”

He lets go of her throat, even if that voice inside asks him to keep chocking, wants Sirius to hurt people, all people, all the time. Warns him they are all a danger to him.

“Of course you don’t expect me to do that, since you asked Father and Arcturus to stand by my lord, regardless. Which was very wise of you. So, why are you angry with me, for doing what you asked the men in our family to keep doing?”

“I wanted some support,” Sirius yells at her. “Some-”

“You have my support. I made sure the dark lord won’t hurt you. I made sure of it, Sirius. Now, *that* is fucking support! I tried to persuade him to leave the Potter child alone, too. I truly tried, but how is it my fault you never gave him blood protection? I support you, you cretin, day in, day out. But no, nothing I do will be as valuable as what a man does, apparently. You aren’t upset with Grandfather, with Father even-”

“They asked for my opinion, first! They asked me what I want to do!”

She rolls her eyes. “They *asked*. How nice of them! Meanwhile, I am out there saving your fucking life, you ungrateful sack of bones!”

“How are you saving my life?”

“It’s my business. I don’t need accolades, I don’t want validation. I know I won’t ever get any, I’m used to it. You’ll learn, anyway, and soon at that. You’ll learn what I spared you off. Not that you’ll be grateful- the opposite. But I am used to taking the blame, as well. I don’t care. As long as you’re safe.”

She turns and leaves in a flutter of expensive robes.

Sirius lies back on the floor.

(-)

James sends him a long letter, through Peter.

There's no reproach in it, no ugly words.

Voldemort once told Sirius that James will abandon him for Lily, that James is Lily's husband, first and foremost.

Voldemort doesn't understand friendship, brotherhood.

Sirius abandoned Voldemort for James, and James writes:

'we have to think of Harry now, it's our priority. Mine, Lily's, and I know it is yours, too. But, Padfoot, if we make it out of this, if one day we will be able to think of anything other than keeping our boy safe, I want you to know that the matter isn't settled, far from it. I can't share my life with someone that doesn't trust you, with someone that thinks you'd have me and my son killed. You are my brother, in all ways that count. You, no one else, you came with me to see Mother in the hospital. You held her hand in my place and kissed her forehead. You always did right by me, you never allowed anyone to insult me, even when I deserved it. And while I sometimes did, when you crossed some lines, some dangerous lines- I am sorry, Sirius. I realise only now, when my life's son is at stake, only now I realise what is most important in life. And I will not allow anyone, not even Lily, to speak against you. I can't fight with her now- we both love Harry, we need to keep our shit together for this wonderful son of ours, we have to stay calm and try to make it good for him, try to keep him happy. But if this is ever done….I know Lily isn't happy with me either. That she blames me for not leaving the country, for not trusting Dumbledore. She won't say it, not yet. But eventually we'll have to have some very serious conversations about our future.'

James writes: *'I know you spoke in anger, your last words to her, I know you do not think that way. I know that months ago, I would have been furious with you. But that was before. Now, it doesn't matter to me, what words someone uses, not coming from you, who so readily offered to put your life in extreme danger for us. Nothing matters but Harry. And you'd have kept Harry safe, and she didn't let you do it. You'd have kept us all safe.'*

James writes: *'so many scenarios are going through my head. I have to think of each of them. I try to focus on the one where we all survive. I have to, so I won't go mad. I can't even think of Harry dying. I can't picture it, Sirius. My mind won't let me. But I entertain other ones, all sorts of crazy things. And, if it happens that I die, but Harry somehow survives- Sirius, I want you to be in his life. He won't even miss a thing if I am dead but you are there. It's what consoles me the most, you know? Knowing that even if I'm gone, I won't leave Harry an orphan. He'll have a father, either way. I pray Lily makes it, I hope I can somehow save them both, if it comes to it, that I would be given some god-like power to save them. But this is my*

wish, Sirius. I want you in Harry's life, even if Lily won't want it, even if she fights it. You make her understand that you will be there, at Harry's side. I prefer not to think of how you'd manage that, but I know you have it in you to find a solution to anything, to respect my wish. Promise me, Sirius. Promise me that no matter how you and Lily will or won't get along, Harry will always have you. That you will be his rock. Between you and me, you make a better rock, mate. You always did. That Black blood Father spoke about. Remember when he'd tell us of his uncle's Black wife? How fierce she was? You're all fierce as fuck in that family. Ruthless, sometimes cruel, yeah. But you protect each other, no matter what, don't you? I'm grateful for it, now. I'm grateful that you will be safe, no matter how the war ends. I'm grateful you are on good terms with your grandfather again. That old fucker won't let anyone hurt a Black, yeah? Even if Voldemort wins, I know you will be safe. Don't go on a rampage, mate. If I die, don't cast your life away over my corpse. It won't help me any. I want you to survive, and if Harry is alive, I want you to make sure he survives, too.'

James writes: *'I love you, Sirius. I'm happy to have had you for all these years, the best mate, the best brother a man can ask for.*

And I will see you again, in this life or in the next, we will run together once more, as Padfoot and Prongs.'

Sirius struggles with the response, alone in one of the empty rooms, with Peter waiting in the living room. He brought Sirius ink and parchment, too, but Sirius just weeps over them.

He can't tell James what he'd want to. He simply can't entertain, even in writing, the notion that James will die. He cannot deal with it.

He can't think this might be the last letter to James, the last words. He doesn't want that.

So, he keeps it short, he avoids all mentions of death, and he does his best to reassure James.

'Harry is my family because he's yours. That boy is my son, too.

I did some awful shit, James. You have no idea, and I will never have the nerve to tell you. I will never tell you some things, because I am ashamed of them. But no matter what I did, no matter what I will do, one thing never changed: my loyalty for you, and how all of that transferred to Harry, too, the second you placed him in my arms.

I'm not a good man, James. But I am a good friend. A man's best friend. Padfoot is the purest part of me, it's who I am, it's what magic decided I am, at my core, when it determined that would be the shape I take as an Animagus. Magic never errs.

No matter what I do as Sirius Black, no matter what I did, Padfoot will forever be loyal to his pack, would never hurt the ones he loves, would give his life for them. Padfoot lives to love and care for those around him. Harry will always have the most loyal and ferocious guardian, I promise you that. I swear it, on my magic, on my blood, on my honour.'

It takes him an hour to calm down, to stop crying, enough to get out of that room, and find Peter, standing quietly in the middle of the living room, between a mountain of empty bottles and a mountain of dirty clothes.

“Here.” Sirius gives him the letter, avoiding Peter’s eyes, because he guesses his must still be red and puffy.

But that’s fine, Peter isn’t trying to meet his eyes, anyway.

(-)

It’s only been seven days, but they felt simultaneously like a few years and like a few hours.

Sirius only kept somewhat sober for his talk with the family; outside of that, it’s all a blur of alcohol and heartache.

The knock is short, but loud.

Sirius is so drunk he barely makes it to the door, summons the strength and limb coordination necessary to open it.

His stomach lurches when Voldemort comes inside.

It’s not in fear. Not even in passion.

It’s just longing. He wants him back so badly, it is almost impossible to breathe.

But the man Sirius longs for is gone; this one- this one wants to hurt Harry.

He makes his way back to a pile of laundry he’s been using as a bed, stumbling a few times through empty bottles and plates filled with ashtrays.

He lets himself fall on the clothes.

“What?”

Voldemort takes in the room, slowly, before his gaze settles on Sirius. Nothing changed in it.

How is that possible, when everything between us changed? Why does he look at me as he did last week?

“The Potters seemed to have disappeared. I wonder how that happened.” His voice is full of sarcasm.

“Magic trick.” Sirius searches around for his cigarettes. “Maybe you can pull them out of a hat.”

He finds his cigarettes but not his lighter, nor his wand. It’s unwise to use wandless magic when he’s this drunk, but he’s not a wise man.

“The only reason I’m nor twisting your neck right now,” Voldemort says, extinguishing the flames Sirius fails to keep under control, “is because I know you don’t believe in the prophecy. You truly don’t believe my life is in any danger. That is the only thing that saves you.”

Sirius takes a long drag, filling his lungs with nicotine. When he blows it out he looks at Voldemort through a veil of smoke. “So, what are you going to do about it? Torture me? Good fucking luck with that. I’ll never tell you the Secret.”

“I know torture won’t solve anything.”

“You’ve always been very bright,” Sirius mocks.

Voldemort comes closer, tall and mighty above him; he takes hold of Sirius’ chin, his long fingers wrapped tightly around his jaw.

Sirius years to lean into the touch. Instead, he flinches away.

“You will see sense, eventually. You’ll understand and come back. I’ll have you beg, then.”

“I retract my previous statement.” Sirius sneers. He tries to stand, but he doesn’t make it on his first go. Quite likely he wouldn’t have made it on his second attempt, either, but Voldemort grabs his arms and pulls Sirius up. They’re too close like this, so Sirius stumbles backwards one step. “You’re delusional.”

“Am I? You forgave Bellatrix for McKinnon, even if you swore up and down you won’t.”

“James isn’t Marlene,” Sirius tells him. “And you aren’t Bella.”

What a mistake, what a colossal mistake for Voldemort to compare himself to Bellatrix, to compare James to Marlene.

It enrages Voldemort to hear it. His eyes glint, his face twists with fury.

Will I finally see that temper of his?

No. Well, that is to say, Sirius won’t physically feel it. But Voldemort punishes him, anyway.

“I won’t spare Potter anymore. You lost that favour when you picked him over me. He shall die with his son.”

James would have died with Harry, regardless if his body was alive or not.

Sirius had seen his grandfather turn into a shadow of himself, after Sirius’ father died. He’d seen Druella die a little, and Andromeda was still alive, she only left.

And he remembers his mother and father before they lost their daughter. He knows what they turned into, *after*.

No one survives the death of a child, not truly. Not a man like James, at least.

“Get out!” Sirius demands. “Torture me for the Secret or get the fuck out of my home.”

Voldemort’s eyes narrow dangerously. “This isn’t your home.”

“Then get the fuck out of my sight. Better?”

“Look at you,” Voldemort gestures around them. “A week without me and you’ve gone back to your old habits. I will take my leave, because I’d rather not see you do this to yourself-”

“*You* did this to me!” Sirius screams.

“You are getting far too old to blame your actions on others.”

“Oh, like you’re blaming everything you do, including acting on the prophecy, on Dumbledore?”

“That is different,” Voldemort hisses. “He is my enemy-”

“You are my enemy now.” Sirius shoves at him, filled with impotent anger. But he’s drunk, and weak, and Voldemort is magic incarnated, so it’s as if Sirius is shoving a mountain. “And I can’t fight against you, the way you can at least fight Dumbledore. I can’t, because I’m not strong enough, and even if I were, I would *never* hurt you! So this is what is left for me to do."

“Sirius,” Voldemort whispers.

“You won’t have anything, you know?” Sirius screams, and there- now he’s crying. Fucking shameful. *Pathetic.*

He’s never cried in front of Voldemort, and here he is, offering this undeserving twat one more piece of himself.

“As I drink myself into a stupor in this shithole, I’m not only mourning what I lost, but what you lost. You’ll be all alone.”

It always hurt Sirius to think how lonely Voldemort has been all his life. It still hurts. Love doesn’t go away in a week.

“You’ll kill all your enemies, you’ll have all the power, but you’ll be alone and cold and miserable. You could have had something- we could have had something.” Sirius wipes his tears, furiously, but they keep coming. “I love you, but you throw that away in your chase of imaginary enemies. You’re too busy trying to keep your life and immortality to even realise what you lost. So, here-”

Sirius bends, throws some clothes around, until he finds the ring. He straightens, by some miracle, and holds it to Voldemort. “Let me give you your soul back. You’re in great need of it.”

Voldemort’s face is blank, but his eyes have clouded with emotions Sirius can’t even begin to guess at.

“Keep it.” Voldemort says, and he retreats. One step, two steps. “It was a gift.” It looks as if it takes some effort, but Voldemort turns around, walks to the door. “And I shall keep your soul, Sirius Black, because you belong to me.”

The door slams shut.

(-)

The next night, on Hallow’s Eve, the ring’s steady heartbeat picks up, all of a sudden. Sirius startles from his slumber.

Thud-thud-thud-thud. Faster and faster, vibrating in Sirius’ closed fist.

He opens his palm, stares at it, his own heart going wild.

And then, as suddenly as it started, the ring goes deathly silent.

(-)

He Apparates to Peter’s place. Peter isn’t there, but his mother is sleeping peacefully on the couch, a knitting magazine on her chest.

There’s no sign of a struggle.

He understands what that means, but doesn’t want to accept it.

For a few seconds, he stands there, not having the courage to go where he must.

He stares at Mrs Pettigrew, walks closer, and then he sees the letter on the coffee table.

He only reads the end.

“I’m sorry, Mum, but I have to go away for a while. Aunt Lauren will come tomorrow to look after you. I love you.”

Sirius Apparates to Godric’s Hollow, and *that’s that*. He can see the house, and he shouldn’t see it. The Secret broke.

He goes cold all over.

The second level of the house is blown apart.

Sirius makes his way through the garden, as in a trance, his mind blank, his body cold.

The front door is open.

Don't go inside, a voice warns him. *You'll never recover from what you'll find there.*

Sirius goes inside.

James is by the stairs; he doesn't have his glasses on. He only takes them off when he sleeps.

He could be sleeping now, Sirius tells himself, absurdly. He could be stunned.

He's lying on the floor, at the foot of the stairs.

Sirius hurries to him, kneels at his side. Brown, empty eyes stare at him, lifeless.

Sirius collapses over him.

"Jamie," he begs and when James doesn't snap at him to stop calling him Jamie, he knows.

This is it. It's over. Done. Forever.

For some moments, Sirius can't breathe, and then, suddenly, he's hyperventilating, his head on James' chest, his limbs around him. James is still warm.

He doesn't know how long he stays this way. He doesn't want to get up. Why would he? What's the purpose? How is he expected to live after this?

"Stand up, Padfoot, You've got stuff to do, mate. Come on, up up up!" James yells at him, laughing, dragging Sirius out of bed, shoving his uniform in his arms. "Up, Paddy!! Come on, big boy! Minnie will kill us if we're late for Transfiguration again."

Sirius lets go. He looks around until he finds the glasses on the floor, close by. He picks them up and very gently places them on James's face. He doesn't look right without them.

And then, Sirius stands. He feels like he weights a thousand stones. Up the stairs. Every step is misery. Every step could be his last, before collapsing.

The second floor is a mess. There's rubble everywhere, the roof caved in, cement and big blocks of brick all around him, yet somehow Lily's hair is as bright as ever, the only colour in all that cement and dust grey chaos.

She's half buried under debris and Sirius pulls her out, the muggle way, forgetting he has a wand.

Her eyes are open, too, wide and terrified, the echo of pure, unadulterated horror still etched on her features. He can't stand to look at them. He shuts them.

He has to search for Harry; he doesn't want to, he doesn't want to see Harry's small, broken body, pull it from under some bricks, but he promised James, he *promised*-

He should start with the crib; by some miracle, it looks intact; but on his way to it, he sees something else.

And he's been prepared for James, or as prepared as one can be for such a thing.

For days now, Sirius has been *waiting*. He knew what he'd find, the second he didn't find Peter home.

But nothing, nothing prepares him for this.

Voldemort's body is as imposing in death as it had been in life. Eyes just as red.

"Wake up." Sirius is on his knees, slamming his fists on Voldemort's chest. "Wake up, you stupid motherfucker!" He's yelling, and distantly he can barely recognise his own voice, so much hysteria in it. "Get up! Get the fuck up!"

Something snaps in Sirius's head. "You can't fucking die, remember? You can't!"

The ring is back home. The ring had lost its heartbeat too, not an hour ago.

"Please." Sirius is crying, tears splashing on Voldemort's face. "Please, wake up."

Voldemort doesn't listen to him. He's still grasping his yew wand, between his pale fingers.

Sirius grabs it, furious, out of his mind, places it at his own neck and is about to say the words, to end it all-

A sharp cry. Then another.

What the-

He stands, stumbles over to the crib. Harry stares up at him, eyes wet, forehead spliced in two, bleeding all over.

"Pa-dy!"

That's when he first questions *why* Voldemort is dead on the floor.

'The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord approaches.'

He was right. Voldemort was right. The prophecy was true. Harry killed him, somehow.

"PA-DY! OWIE!" Harry wails and Sirius' mind returns to him.

"Shh" He lifts Harry up. *Gods, there's so much fucking blood*, all over Harry's face. He tries to wipe it away, to see what's causing it, but Harry howls in pain, and then small arms wind around Sirius' neck. "It's aright," Sirius lies. "It's alright."

He needs to do something, because he hears what can only be Hagrid's thunderous roar outside.

He puts Harry back in his crib, who only yells harder, but he'll be fine. He'll be alright. Hagrid will see to it, he'll surely take Harry to Dumbledore, who'll figure out why he's bleeding, how to fix it.

Sirius grabs Voldemort's body and Apparates away, straight to Grimmauld Place kitchen.

His mother shrikes, dropping her wine.

Sirius pays her no mind, goes down to the cellars. Voldemort weighs almost nothing, thin, malnourished, no life inside him, no unbreakable, unshakable will.

He makes a right, cuts his arm and places it on the wall. It slides open for him.

The heart of the house, the source of its magic. The place only the Head of House can open.

The floor is dusty red, runes on top of runs, a millennia worth of them, the blood of all the heads of house before Sirius.

The house changed around this room, the streets outside, the world itself, but this room remains intact.

He lays Voldemort on the floor, performs several cleaning charms, to take away the swot and grime and dust. He places the yew wand between his fingers. Closes those brilliant eyes and casts a powerful stasis spell on him.

He needs to warn Bella and Lucius. To warn his grandfather.

He needs to kill Peter. He knew, deep down, he knew he'll lose Peter, too, but he prayed to gods he ignored since childhood, that it won't come to this. That Sirius won't have to kill Peter.

But traitors- traitors can't go unpunished.

Rage is the only thing keeping him standing. He'll go after Peter first. There are only so many places he could hide at. He'll go to the Muggles, knowing the magical side won't be safe for him.

And Peter doesn't know too many muggle places.

"What happened?" His mother is in his face as soon as Sirius returns to the kitchen. "Was that- was that- was it *him*? Answer me!" She demands, trailing after him, her fingers curled in his shirt, as he climbs the stairs to the entrance hall. "You can't come home with that and-"

"Let go. I have to kill Peter," Sirius growls at her, grabs her wrist.

"You can't go anywhere! If he's dead, gods, if he's dead, you need to *run*. Now. Before the Ministry learns of it. They'll come after you!"

Sirius ignores her, grips her wrist tighter, *tighter*, until she screams and her fingers go numb, let go of him.

“Tell Grandfather he’s gone- no, go to Lestrange, first. Go, *now*!”

Sirius pushes her towards the fireplace and then turns-

He falls unconscious on his next step, his mother cursing him from behind.

(-)

His mother’s shrill voice wakes him up.

“Filthy animals! How dare you!”

For a second, Sirius doesn’t know what’s going on. For a second, life is bearable. Then it all comes back and, like a child, he draws the blanket over his head and tries to will himself unconscious.

But his mother’s screams only get louder. She sounds scared, so Sirius stands, takes his wand from his nightstand. Filled with rage, he hurries out his room, down a flight of stairs, to see no less than thirteen Hit Wizards, facing off his mother and Dobby.

She’s in front of the stairs, hands extended, gripping both railings.

“Madam, we’ll arrest you, too, if you do not move.“

“No need,” Sirius says, coldly and everyone’s eyes snap to him. The Hit Team tenses, falls into a defensive position.

His fingers burn, his wand calls to him, to be used. Dark Magic whispers in in ear, wanting blood.

But his mother is right there. What’s the point in fighting anymore, risking her life, and for *what*?

He lost everything, there’s no life to speak of.

“Kreacher!”

His mother will need Kreacher. For a while, she’ll be alone. Thank the gods, Regulus is in Egypt, and the President is their Grandfather’s friend. He won’t send Regulus back, even if the Aurors ask for him. He’ll grow old, he’ll marry and the Blacks will carry on.

Kreacher appears by his side, making his mother gasp in shock.

“If they touch a strand of Mother’s hair,” he instructs, “bring the house down on their heads.”

Kreacher’s beady eyes immediately assess the situation, the intruders.

“Yes, Master.”

“My wand. Do not relinquish it.”

“Master,” Kreacher bows, and when Sirius throws him the wand, Kreacher catches it.

“Shall we?” Sirius asks the Hit wizards, making his way down the stairs, uncaring of whatever fate awaits him.

Thirteen stunners hit him in the chest at the same time.

(-)

He wakes up in Azkaban. The Dementors stare at him through the bars, but Sirius has no happy memory for them.

It’s cold and wet and miserable.

He turns into Padfoot.

(-)

Bella’s voice wakes him. For the first time in however long it’s been, he gets out of the trance he’d been in, transforms back into Sirius and throws himself at the bars, tries to break them apart as he sees Aurors dragging her.

She hisses and spits and curses. Behind her, the Lestrange brothers and Crouch are silent.

Savage, the surviving twin, slaps her when she mocks him about his dead brother.

And then Rodolphus is moving, hands bound behind his back, but he bodily slams Savage into a wall, bends his head-

Savage yells, and Rodolphus spits out half of the man’s ear on the floor, a bloody, disgusting mess.

“Control him!” Many Aurors demand, but the Dementors don’t touch Rodolphus.

He’s the man that fed them, in secret, for the past many years.

But the Aurors don’t have any fond memories of Rodolphus, so they curse him to oblivion, and drag him to a cell, as others drag Bella and Rabastan and Crouch, who’s weeping, head lowered.

(-)

Pain, sharp and sobering.

“If you want it to stop, Black, you have to cooperate. Where is the Dark Lord?”

Sirius laughs because really, why would he ever want them to stop? He clings to the pain, it cleanses him of guilt and sorrow.

(-)

His beard is long and dirty. His hair is all in knots. He can’t smell himself, but his clothes are stained and filthy.

Sirius doesn’t know where he is, half the time. Remains in his head, with James, playing Quidditch and then he’s with James, dead in his living room.

He’s with Voldemort, fucking him, kissing him in their bed, and then he’s with Voldemort in Griammauld’s place, cleaning his body.

He spends a lot of time as Padfoot because the pain and horror is slightly lesser in that form, but when he can think, he turns back into Sirius because he knows he *deserves* to suffer. He should suffer for all the shit he did, for all the awful, harrowing acts he committed.

He deserves to be punished for it.

Dark magic leaves his system, slowly, making him weaker than even the Dementors and lack of food did.

He doesn’t think of his father; he thought he would, he had, when he came to see Morfin, but Sirius acquired worse memories since then.

His father would be a comfort to him in this hell, but he can’t think of him, because he can’t remember him properly, can’t remember his smile, the safety on his arms when he held Sirius.

(-)

He's dragged out of the cell by a very displeased Moody. *Maybe they'll give me the Kiss.* A public execution, make a show off it. Dementors flank him as he's chained and pushed to walk and stumble.

He laughs. Dementors are out of luck. They can't take his soul, because Voldemort already did.

"Insane." Robards mutters.

They take him to the small, stony yard, but he's not given the Kiss. Instead, they take a Portkey.

Next he blinks, Sirius is being tied to a chair, faced with the Wizengamot.

"You are here to stand trial for your crimes," Crouch spits, with disdain.

"Alleged crimes," an old man Sirius knows speaks, suddenly at Sirius side.

I know him, I know him.

It takes seconds for the name to come to him. Wilkes. His family's jurist.

He speaks again, and Crouch answers, but Sirius cannot and doesn't care enough to focus through the following discussion, because up in the stands, separate from the Wizengamot seats, he sees his mother.

She looks at him, back straight, shoulders drawn, eyes blazing. She gives him a tiny smile.

Once he sees her, the room becomes real around him.

This is real, he tells himself.

Besides her, sits Narcissa, with her ice-cold eyes, hands clasped in her lap.

Cygnus, starring daggers at Crouch. His grandfather Pollux, no kindness in his eyes, seated between his son and his wife.

Sirius breathes, for the first time in- how long has it been? Months?

And then he moves his eyes to the Wizengamot seats, and there-

You'll be alright, his father tells him, and Sirius could weep, because he can remember his father's voice again. It sounds so clear when Sirius looks at his grandfather.

He doesn't look at Sirius, busy saying something to Crouch, no doubt insulting, because Crouch's face twists.

Abraxas smirks, next to his grandfather.

That's not good. If Abraxas is holding the seat- where is Lucius? Sirius is quite certain Lucius wasn't in Azkaban- even as lost as he was lost in his head, surely he'd have noticed Lucius.

And if he's not in Azkaban, but he's not holding his seat, then-

He can't have died. Not Lucius! If anyone died during arrest, it would have been Rodolphus, never-

"The defence calls Lucius Malfoy to take the stand," Wilkes says.

And there is Lucius, entering the room, dripping superiority as he takes a seat.

Must have lost my mind in Azkaban if, even for a second, I thought this man would ever get in trouble.

"What worth is it, the word of another Death Eater?" someone asks from the crowd.

"Mr. Malfoy has been acquitted on all accounts, I'll remind you. By this very court. He was a victim, under the Imperius Curse, and I will not allow you to add to his hardships with your slander," Wilkes snaps.

Imperius, really. Oh, yes, Lucius and Imperius get along famously- he is perfect at casting it and at resisting.

And then Lucius starts speaking, and Sirius never thought he'd miss that drawl, but he had. He *basks* in it, as Lucius testifies that, from his knowledge, Sirius pretended to join Voldemort to spy for Dumbledore.

"Perhaps Professor Dumbledore, who's been so kind to speak up on behalf of Severus Snape, will like to speak up now, too," Lucius ends his lengthy and impressive testimony.

Sirius rages when he hears about Snape. Of course Dumbledore stood up for Snape.

And there he comes, dressed in violet and yellow robes, with a grave expression as he explains to the Wizengamot that Sirius had started as a spy, but turned on Dumbledore eventually.

"Who are you to ask people to spy for you?" Greengrass demands. "On what authority? Your so called Order? An illegal organisation. Some might call you terrorists."

Sirius drifts in and out of focus the whole time. He can't get enough of his mother. He looks at her, in awe; he never thought he'd see anything again, except Dementors and the occasional Auror.

"No," his grandfather says, and his voice brings Sirius back into focus.

He thinks the proceedings are coming to the end, but he isn't too sure. Must be, since Moody is coming close to Sirius again.

Crouch makes a frustrated noise. "It is-"

"You're not taking him back to Azkaban."

“Until the trial is over,” Crouch begins to speak, but his grandfather interrupts him.

“He shall be detained in the Ministry’s cells, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, until we can prove his innocence. I know you have something to prove, Crouch, what with your son, but not all of us raised deranged murderers. Sirius is innocent, and you and others got too drunk on power in the wake of Voldemort’s-”

The entire room flinches, with few exception’s.

“-fall, enacted draconian measures, sent people to Azkaban without trials, which is unforgivable. No one should be sent there unless proven guilty. Defendants should be held in the Ministry’s cells. And that is where Sirius is going.” He stands. “I will hear no more of it. Those in agreement?”

Almost everyone raises their hand.

Moody looks truly pissed off.

“Keep those things away from him,” his grandfather orders, next, and no Dementor approaches Sirius.

Dazed, Sirius is lifted off the chair, Moody and Robards dragging him between them out of the courtroom. More Aurors surround him in the hallways, on all sides.

He thinks a dozen or so people came to arrest him, too. He’s not too sure.

He’s not sure how he survived that many stunners to the chest, either.

“All these Aurors for little old me?” Sirius enquires. He’s shocked to hear his voice. It’s so unfamiliar to him. “Afraid of me, are you?”

“Shut up or I’ll gag you,” Moody barks at him.

Might as well shut up. It hurt his throat to speak.

He’s taken close by, to the Ministry cells he’s so familiar with. They look warm to Sirius, cosy and welcoming, even if, once, in what seems like another lifetime, he hated them.

But now they are like a place of the Heavens.

Moody pushes him in a cell, and he falls on his face on concrete floor. He doesn’t bother standing up.

The floor is cold, but not as cold as Azkaban. It’s not wet, no storm or ocean water coming through a tiny barred window.

That’s because there’s no window here. But there’s light, nevertheless, some candles in the distance.

Many Aurors are posted outside his cell, all around the hallway.

“Sir, he can’t get away with it, can he?” Sirius hears someone ask.

A grunt. “You’ll learn, and learn fast, that the world isn’t fair. That the likes of Black and Malfoy always get away with everything. That they can don masks and go around killing good wizards and witches, hard working people that trained for years to serve our country, and they’ll get away with it, because of daddy’s fat vault, because they’re society boys with pretty eyes. We might as well count our lucky starts we caught Lestrange actively torturing Frank and Alice, otherwise these spineless, old, corrupt fools, would have excused even him, no doubt. It is what it is, lad, but I’m done. If they pardon Black, I’m done with this shit.”

Sirius slumbers, on and off, disorientated. He’s woken up by voices, someone fighting in the distance.

His head hurts, but it always does. Still, he’s not used to lights anymore, and he thinks the bright flames in the courtroom fucked him up.

He keeps his eyes closed, even when he hears his cell door open.

“Sirius? Can you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know who I am? Do you remember my name?”

He wonders what would happen if he didn’t, if the Dementors ruined his mind completely- would his grandfather leave him to rot?

“Wilkes. My father’s- my jurist.”

Wilkes breathes out, relived.

“They refused you medical attention, on the grounds they can’t make sure you won’t be given dangerous potions. But, when pressed enough, they couldn’t refuse you legal council. However, I am afraid we only have a few minutes. We under a secure, standard Privacy Spell, but I advise you to …be careful with your words, regardless.”

Wilkes coughs. “They don’t have any definitive proof, mostly conjuncture, but some of it is…quite damning. I do believe we can get a favourable outcome, either way. However, my colleagues, the ones that defended Mr Malfoy, did so successful by allowing the use of Veritaserum.”

He waits for Sirius to speak. Sirius can’t think of what to say.

“It would certainly hasten the proceedings and would prove your innocence beyond doubt. Mr Malfoy assured me you will be able to maintain your innocence under the Serum. Is that true?”

Sirius snorts. Since he hadn’t seen Lucius in Azkaban, he has to assume Lucius’ trial was held fast, at the very beginning. Lucius lies so well under Veritaserum, they were all trained to resist the truth serum, but Lucius did that when he was healthy, with his mind intact.

Not after -

“How long? How long since-”

“Seven months.”

Gods. They felt like centuries.

Can he lie, after seven months of Dementors induced torture and starvation, sleep depravation and *actual* torture, in those first weeks, when Aurors were searching for Voldemort’s body?

“Do you like Elton John?” Voldemort asks, over dinner, and Sirius wants to scoff, of course he doesn’t like Elton John, he already told Voldemort-

The ‘yes’ almost slips past his lips, and Sirius glares at Voldemort, who smiles.

“You should stop drugging me without warning,” he hisses, though he’s already in pain from refusing to answer.

“Do you?”

“No,” Sirius spits, and a blinding pain rushes through his brain.

“Say it again, but this time control your face. Tell me you hate Elton John, and look comfortable saying it.”

“Let them give me the serum,” Sirius says.

“Are you sure?”

You can do it, Voldemort says, and Sirius can see his proud expression when Sirius managed to insist he doesn’t like any of Elton’s songs, he even laughed at the absurdity of someone suggesting it.

“Yes.”

‘If a Malfoy can do something, so can a Black,’ his father also advises him.

“Aright. That will help your case immensely.”

Or destroy his case, in case Sirius can’t lie.

“My brother,” Sirius croaks.

“In Egypt, studying.”

Sirius wants to ask if he has charges, if he can ever leave Egypt safely, but he doesn’t dare. In case Regulus escaped all notice, it wouldn’t do to bring attention to him.

“My ward- Harry- Harry Potter.”

“No one knows where the Boy-Who-Lived spends his time.”

Boy-Who-Lived.

Sirius shudders.

(-)

Dawlish spits in the water before handing Sirius the glass through the bars.

Sirius is so thirsty, has been thirsty for months, and he licked salt water out of puddles that gathered on the floor on days when the guards ‘forgot’ to bring him a cup of water and a bowl of porridge.

But he was Padfoot when he did that. There was no one around to witness it.

He takes the glass, and even if all his instincts yell at him to drink it, Sirius throws it in Dawlish’s face.

Another Auror, a young woman Sirius doesn’t recognise, so young she must have just finished her training-

That would make her my age, Sirius thinks, shocked. But she looks so much younger than he feels.

She hands him another cup of water, spit free. “There you go, Sirius.”

“Familiarities with the inmates will get you fired,” Dawlish snarls at her, drying himself with his wand.

Sirius searches her face. It’s - *gods, what is her name?* A muggleborn Hufflepuff, same year as he was. Sirius thinks they kissed a few times, he can’t remember -

“Piss off, you worthless vermin. Leave her alone,” Sirius says, stepping between Mulciber, Snape, Avery, and a poor muggleborn cowering before them.

“Bothering girls, Snivellus?” James mocks. “Why don’t you bother me, instead?”

“Thank you,” the girl whispers, when Sirius draws his wand, and tells her to run away.

But he can’t remember her name.

“And replace me with who?” she asks Dawlish. “Sir,” she adds, after a second.

The water is clean, cool and heavenly. He will never again take clean water for granted.

He feels slightly more aware as he's taken out of the cell and brought to the courtroom.

(-)

They really don't have much on him, turns out.

He was a Death Eater, that is undeniable, with his Mark, and with Dumbledore admitting he sent Sirius to Voldemort.

Dumbledore doesn't have the legal right to ask anyone to spy, but then, if they want to make an issue out of it, then they'll have to arrest Dumbledore, too. No one wants that. So they all pretend Dumbledore was within his rights to make such demands of Sirius, what with 'special, wartime exceptions'.

Wilkes insists Sirius abandoned Voldemort the moment he told Dumbledore he would do so.

"His grandfather advised him that it isn't his obligation to spy for Dumbledore. My client renounced Voldemort the very day he told Professor Dumbledore he would."

No one betrayed Sirius; apparently, all caught Death Eaters never mentioned his name. Most of them didn't know it, of course, but even those that knew it, like Avery, who was happy to betray others to save his own skin- Sirius' name was never mentioned.

Snape is the only one that could testify against Sirius- *hells, forget the Death Eater part;* Sirius used the Cruciatus on him. That, alone, comes with an Azkaban sentence.

But then, from what Sirius gathered, Snape is on thin ice, as well, Dumbledore barely got him out, again with his illegal spying claims.

"We have listened to the evidence," Crouch says, more and more displeased. "There is one more thing you are accused of. Betraying the Potters. Dumbledore informed us that you had been their Seeker Keeper. Your actions led to the murder of two young people. You are complicit-"

Sirius is yet to say a single word, because he won't bother, but also because Wilkes won't let him, always hurrying to answer.

"Peter Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper," Wilkes says, and then he presents many papers, tracing gold moving from Lestrange Vault to Peter's.

Months on end, almost an entire year before that Halloween.

"A rat, Sirius? You're friends with a rat?" Voldemort asks.

Sirius' rage awakens, anew.

And then one of the Head Healers arrives to testify. “In the last weeks of the war, when we were short staffed and had little supplies, Lestrange threatened to kill my family if I ever miss an appointment with Mrs Pettigrew. Clearly, Mr Pettigrew had powerful friends.”

The Healer is very careful to say Lestrange, with no Mr or Mrs to precede it. So careful, that Sirius knows, instinctively, this was Bellatrix, not Rodolphus.

“How is she?” Sirius asks, startling everyone around. He’s looking at the Healer, who flinches when he meets Sirius’ eyes. “How is Mrs Pettigrew? Is she taken care of? Is she well?”

“I-”

“You’re not allowed to address the witness, Black!”

“Don’t speak,” Wilkes whispers to him.

“Very well,” Crouch concludes, some minutes later. “Pettigrew is a Death Eater; we imagined, what with his sudden disappearance. That doesn’t prove he was the Secret Keeper.”

“You don’t have any proof my client was Secret Keeper, either.”

And that’s when Sirius is asked if he is willing to renounce his rights to privacy and be given the truth serum.

Sirius signs away a piece of paper and he swallows the vial Moody shoves into his hands.

As he lies through all his answers, with ease, it occurs to Sirius that Veritaserum brewed by Voldemort was far more potent than whatever Sirius just swallowed. It barely hurts at all, as Sirius is drilled, over and over.

He denies ever killing at Voldemort’s orders; he denies supplying information to Voldemort, he denies aiding him in any way.

The only truth he speaks is that he hand’t been Secret Keeper.

“Lily didn’t trust me, because of my Mark. She said she couldn’t risk it. I blame myself for it,” Sirius says, and it’s the only time in his trial that he bows his head, in shame and guilt. “In a way, it is my fault, because I couldn’t make her trust me.”

“Did you sympathise with Voldemort’s ideology?”

“Objection!” Wilkes intervenes. “That has nothing to do-“

“No. Of course not.” He gestures at Dumbledore. “There stands the most powerful man in the world, a half-blood. I gave my own blood to James’ son, another half-blood, tying him to me forever. I never believed in that blood purity nonsense.”

Dumbledore looks surprised, watching Sirius with a thoughtful expression.

“Did you, in any shape or form, assist Voldemort in his bid to take over the county?”

“Mr Crouch, you’re just recycling the questions. My client already answered this, in many forms, how long will you-”

“No,” Sirius says, only a dull pain thudding at his temples.

“Do you know where Voldemort’s body is?”

“No.”

They keep at it, despite Wilkes’ objections, Crouch asking him the same things, with slight variations, for what feels like hours, until Sirius’ voice is raw, scratchy, and the serum finally leaves his system.

“Before we deliberate, it would help your case if you were to give us same names, Black. Some Death Eaters you saw while you were ‘spying’.”

Sirius glares at him. “You lock me away in Azkaban, and now you expect me to do your job for you, too?”

Crouch opens his mouth, but Sirius keeps going.

“I’ve only seen poor Lucius, clearly under some sort of compulsion or another, and Rodolphus Lestrange. Some others, I won’t name, because they didn’t look as if they were there of their own free will, either, and I won’t throw an innocent, possibly desperate person in your merciful hands, Crouch. Oh- wait, yes. There was another like Lestrange, fanatical and righteous in his devotion to Voldemort. Your *son*. But I believe you got him already, I heard him weeping every night in his cell, asking for his daddy to save him, to take pity on him.”

There. Suck on that, you bastard.

Sirius remembers Voldemort, in that meeting with those old men- he remembers his grandfather willing to throw Barty to the wolves, so he could destroy Crouch’s career.

He remembers, so clearly, that Voldemort prohibited it.

“He is under my protection.”

Voldemort had more mercy and consideration for that boy than his own father.

And that is unforgivable, in Sirius’ eyes. He thinks in many people’s eyes. Crouch not only managed to raise a murderer, but then he threw his own son in Azkaban, to save his career.

Nothing will save you, Sirius thinks. Not from a crime like that. A lawful crime, but more immoral than many others.

No one is innocent in that room, in the Wizengamot. They are all horrible, one way or another. But to sacrifice one’s own son, give him to Dementors…that is beyond monstrous.

Crouch goes pale, and sends Sirius back to the Ministry cells as the Wizengamot deliberates on the verdict.

Two hours later, he’s declared innocent.

What a joke, Sirius thinks.

Chapter End Notes

RIP James and Lily. When I said happy ending, sadly they weren't included.

Everyone was sort of a dick to Lily in this chapter; I don't blame her, she is right not to trust Sirius- even if she was wrong in this particular situations, she was right in all she said. If I had been in her place, I wouldn't have trusted Sirius, either, not with my son. But I also understand James, because while James is wilfully blind to parts of Sirius, he does know him better, at his core, has an extraordinary bond with him.

Now, I am quite familiar with the law, Anglo-Saxon law including, but first of all I didn't want to bore you (and myself) with how actual trials unfold, and secondly- Harry Potter law, from canon, is very...ugh...dubious, so I went with it, even though it doesn't quite resemble real world proceedings.

I can promise this was the worst chapter, emotionally speaking. We can only go up from here, steadily.
And Sirius will, of course, get Harry back next chapter.

Please, don't hate me! Pretty please! I assure you, I hurt myself by writing this, too. If you have the time, I always love to hear from you! ❤️

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His grandfather and old Wilkes approach Sirius as the rest of the Wizengamont and assorted spectators leave the room, even his family members.

“Put this on.” His grandfather extends a bundle of cloth to him.

Sirius obeys, taking it. It’s a robe, soft to the touch, pristine, with the Black coat of arms blazoned over it.

“I forced Crouch into keeping the press out of the courtroom, but they will be outside, now that it is over,” his grandfather says, waving his wand at Sirius’ face.

Sirius feels the magic, but has no idea what it’s for. Probably an attempt to tame his hair, or beard, or who knows what else is wrong with him.

“You won’t speak to them, you won’t look at them. You follow me, keep your eyes ahead. You do not bow your head, you do not hide.”

His grandfather looks at him, face devoid of all expression, and a few moments later Sirius realises he’s expecting confirmation Sirius understood him.

“Yes.”

“Let us be on our way, then.”

Sirius walks behind him, though it’s odd to walk again without Moody or another Auror grabbing him, dragging him along.

Wilkes walks behind Sirius, and, as soon as the grand doors open, deafening noise smashes into Sirius, the flashes of cameras, his name called by several voices.

Don’t react, follow Grandfather, look ahead, Sirius thinks, like a mantra. *One step after another.*

His grandfather Pollux and Cygnus flank him on either side, as soon as they step outside the courtroom.

It’s going to be alright, his father tells him, and something inside Sirius relaxes, surrounded by the men in his family. The noise, the flashes of the camera, the world smashes against his shields, and Sirius manages to walk all the way to the elevators.

Once inside, they stay in formation. No one speaks. When the bars open to let them out, Grandfather Pollux reminds Sirius to start walking again by placing his hand on Sirius’ mid back, for only a second.

More people, more flashes. They are so bright! His eyes hurt, his head hurts, and so many people, all around him-

One step after another. Don't flinch. It will be over soon.

He almost walks into his grandfather, so focused on his task that he hadn't realised the man stopped. He turns, and Sirius blinks, realising they made it to the Apparation spot.

He grabs Sirius' arm, and in the next second, Sirius is home.

Where he was always meant to be. *I shouldn't have left.*

He has no time to think anything else, to process the fact he's free, because he finds himself in his mother's arms.

"I'm dirty," he says, remembering she didn't like that, that he was always supposed to be perfectly clean, all his clothes in order, his hair combed.

She only hugs him tighter. He can smell the salt before he feels her tears on his neck. He flinches.

Azkaban flashes behind his eyelids, and it's as if he never left, that seawater smell-

She's grasping his hand now, trying to lead him up the stairs.

"A moment, Walburga," his grandfather comes between them. "I need to talk to him."

"Surely, it can wait!"

Sirius finds himself yanked once more, much less gentle than his mother, this time by his shoulder, until he's shoved into an armchair in a close by room.

He marvels at how comfortable it is under him, after the cells and the Wizengamot chair. Fleeting sensations course through him, too fast to hold on to.

"Look at me."

He looks up. His grandfather looms over him, his other grandfather and Cygnus not far behind. In the doorway, his grandmother Irma attempts to hold onto Sirius' mother.

"It's all over now. I got you out, fixed the mistakes your naivety and recklessness caused, and we can put all this mess behind us. No more rebellion, no more meddling half-bloods, no more *friends*. You are the Head of this House, and that is all you need to be. You will marry and do your duty. Understood? Family is all that matters, and you'll dedicate yourself to it, heart, body and soul."

"Let him breathe, for Morgana's sake!" his mother shrikes, her hands like claws in his shoulders. Sirius didn't even notice when she got behind him. "Can't you see he's not…well? Let him breathe, let him rest!"

“No. No more letting him be, no more standing aside and allowing him to pick the worst possible paths. He will do as he is told, and that is how you keep him safe. That is how we all stay safe.”

There, surrounded by family, finally learning his lesson, finally realising that there is, indeed, nothing more important, that family is safety, he finally *wakes* up, the veil on his brain lifting, the fog clearing. He realises what is missing.

He stands. “Bellatrix,” he says.

“There is nothing to be done for her; she was caught torturing Aurors, she fought her arrest, and no matter how much we tried at her trial, she refused to renounce Voldemort.”

That name, out loud, strikes something inside him, and he can’t believe he can still hurt, after everything. A deep ache, right where his heart should be, but now there’s only a painful, gaping space.

“I don’t accept it,” Sirius says. “She is family. We leave no one behind.” Family is all that matters. His father was right, he was right all along, he tried to teach Sirius, and Sirius failed, so many times. No more.

“She is beyond help. She abandoned us for that abomination, over and over again, even after his fall. There is nothing to be done. I pulled all the favours I had left to get you out. Do you know what I had to do? I had to replace a Minister for you, that’s what I had to do!”

“Kreacher,” Sirius asks, and even the sight of that old bugger is something to treasure.

“Master?” He bows low, but his eyes are steady, staring into Sirius’, sharp and ready to obey.

“My wand.”

“Kreacher will retrieve it from where Kreacher kept it safe. Kreacher did not relinquish it, as Master ordered. Not to the filthy mudbloods in uniforms, not to Mistress, not to Old Master.”

“He is a Black too, Sirius. Do not be so harsh with him. He’s just doing his duty.”

“He’s an elf,” Sirius spit back at his father, angered with Kreacher for telling on him, reporting his every move to his parents. “A lowly creature.” He’s aghast his father would say this thing was a Black.

“He has been with us for hundreds of years. He is the walking memory of centuries of our legacy. He knows more about our ways that you do. He may be a creature, he does not have our blood, but he has been a part of this household since the days of the old. Blacks lived and died under his gaze, Blacks were disowned, Blacks left, yet here he is. He is ours.”

“Sirius, sit!” His grandfather raises his voice.

Sirius ignores him, walks past him, down the hallway, up the stairs. All his muscles- or what remains of them- protest only a few steps in. His legs burn, his back hurts terribly, a sharp, unrelating pain, but *one step in front of the other*, until he reaches his father’s bedroom.

Sirius discards his robe, his prison uniform, and climbs into the claw-footed bath. He wants to sink into it, to float in hot water, perhaps drown in it, but he won't.

He still enjoys, distantly, the spray of water, the feel of shampoo over his hair, familiar and so foreign, at once.

By the time he's done, his shoulders burn just as badly as his legs. When he dares look down upon his body, he doesn't recognise it.

How is it possible one loses so much weight in seven months? It's a harrowing sight, so he stops looking, covers himself with towels as soon as he's out. Fresh towels, as fresh as the shampoo.

Everything in his father's room is under a stasis spell.

His mother is really terrible with letting go of the things that belonged to men who left her, it seems. She clings to them, leaves their rooms intact, hoping against hope they will come back to her.

When he sees his face in the mirror above the sink, he freezes.

That's not me. That can't be me. Thick beard covers most of his face. His eyes look empty.

Panic and grief engulf him, but *one step in front of the other.*

Sirius opens the cabinet, finds his father's goblin made razors with their charmed blade.

"I want to shave!" Sirius says, from the doorway, watching his father doing it.

His father laughs, the blade moves over his cheek.

Sirius wants so badly to be like him, to dress like him, and look like him, shave and wear fancy robes, that heavy ring, go to the Ministry and do Important Things.

"There will come a time when you will hate it," he says, wiping away the foam with a towel, cleaning the blade. "You don't need to shave-"

"Neither do you!" Sirius insists. His father never has a beard, like some men Sirius saw.

He laughs, and when Sirius crosses his arms over his chest, making sure to pout, his father lifts him in his arms, takes him to the mirror.

He smells so good, and Sirius leans into him, as he watches their reflections in the mirror. 'I already look like him', he thinks, pleased. 'I'm much smaller, but I look like Father. Everyone says so.'

Everyone but his father, who always tells Sirius he looks like his mother.

He cuts himself, his pure blood for which a war was fought dripping on white porcelain, and he hasn't even started yet, just pulled the blade out. When he looks back at the mirror, he

can't stand it.

"Kreacher," he whispers. Even his voice doesn't sound like his own.

He closes his eyes. He wants to cover his ears, too.

"Master? Kreacher found the wand, left it on the bed-"

"Shave me."

With his eyes closed, Sirius allows a small hand to direct him somewhere, sits when told, and then he just waits there, as anger gathers inside him, as all his grief turns to rage.

Even sitting still hurts, proves to be an effort for his wasted body. He's filled with weakness, he is *weak,* and he must not be weak, so he focuses on his rage. He thinks of his father's rage, even if rarely witnessed, but he imagines how angry Orion Black would be to see his firstborn in this condition, one of his nieces fled, the other arrested, kept with impunity by Aurors that do not deserve to even glance at her aristocratic face, let alone touch her.

"There. Kreacher is done."

Sirius trembles, locked in his position, lost in his head.

"Master is ready," Kreacher repeats.

"What did others do before me?" Sirius asks, opening his eyes, staring down at this old elf, at the walking memory of their lineage. "What did others do when everyone turned against us? In those olden days, those golden days, as great grandfather Sirius called them?"

"Masters reminded the world why the world does not turn against Masters. Masters fought, Masters killed, bled, and died, but they never allowed others to trespass against us. Masters are Black, and Masters never back down, whatever the cost. Masters led wars against the fae, against goblins, against giants, dragons, centaurs, werewolves, muggles and mudbloods. Masters won, every time. Even if Masters died, heroically and courageously, Masters left new Masters behind, and left them the world as inheritance, with all its spoils."

"If I die, take care of Regulus," Sirius orders, though he shouldn't bother. Kreacher will serve loyally, anyway.

"Kreacher will do his duty. Kreacher's ancestors were spoils of war, too, and now Kreacher is proud to be inheritance. Masters of old were ruthless, but they were merciful, too." He bows. "Masters did not wipe out all the fae, and so Kreacher is here to reward that mercy, eternally. To serve as a reminder of the once mighty fae, that dared to turn against the Blacks and lost, as all shall lose who repeat that folly. When Master looks at Kreacher, Master should remember that long ago, the Blacks won the war for magic, and who has the right to wield it; that they destroyed opponents far greater than the puny Ministry, filled with filthy mudbloods."

He bows again. "Tessuth remembers, Master. Master should ask Tessuth, about the Old days, about the Elven forests, about the Elven race, tall and proud and made all of pure magic,

toying with the tiny humans trying to raise castles, to survive. The tiny humans fought, led by Blacks, who could command the night sky, who had stars as soldiers, and now the elves are the tiny ones, serving wizards."

But those were different days; the Blacks were many, and they were strong, all wielders of astral magic. The Malfoys were great in numbers, too, the Parkinsons- and so many other olden houses that perished in the Elvish Wars.

We've all grown weaker, since. The days of the old are gone, the world has changed, irrevocably, and Sirius knows better than trying to reinstate a glory and rule that has no place in the new world. But he can look after his own House, at least.

When Sirius leaves the bathroom, he catches a glimpse in the mirror again.

It's even worse without the beard. His cheeks sunk in, his lips white, bloodless, his bones so sharp it's a wonder they haven't cut his skin from the inside.

He goes to his father's dresser and looks at the back, where his most official robes were kept. He grabs one of them, and puts it on. Once more, he's forced to realise he has grown taller than his father, but he's so diminished, it hardly matters. His skeletal body disappears under the material.

He has to face the mirror again, but this time he has something to focus on. When he grabs his wand from the bed, power rushes through his veins.

It's dark and reassuring. His wand will never be the same again. He turned it to the Arts, and it will always remember.

It obeys him as easily as it always had, and with it in his hand, his fear disappears completely, only anger left behind.

The robe, on its own, makes him feel powerful, too. All that black, the golden buttons shaped like the greyhounds of their family crest.

The Black family coat of arms on his chest, the diamond star.

Toujours Pure, written in the finest threads of gold, woven through the material.

He dries his hair, grown to his mid back, with a flick of his wand, then rips out a good portion of it as he combs it savagely. It's brittle, weak- *weak, weak, weak*- and weakness must be purged, discarded, cast aside.

With a wave of his wand, he cuts it short, lets only the strong roots remain.

He does not look like himself; he doesn't look like his father.

He looks deranged, he looks like a dead man walking, but the symbols of power on his robe, the wand in his hand, remind him he is a dangerous man, that they sent thirteen Hit Wizards to arrest him; that they fear him, not only because he's a Black, but because he somehow ended up as 'the dark lord's right-hand man', as someone said during the trial.

Any experienced Auror would know that was Rodolphus.

He wonders, briefly, how the rumour started it was Sirius.

Probably Rita writing a nice little article about it when Sirius was arrested. He's glad he burned her armchair. He should have burned her with it.

He shouldn't have allowed her to disrespect him like that, for years, writing about him, without consequences.

He failed to teach her a lesson. No newspaper reported on his father's affairs, as public as they were. No one dared, because everyone knew his father would punish them for it.

No newspaper reported on his great grandfather alcoholism, even if it was obvious in the last decade of his life. There were no pictures with him wasted, in a public space, as there was newspapers with Sirius drunk out of his mind, all over magical Britain.

But Sirius was a little boy, without the shield of his family. Sirius was tame, a runaway, a rebel, an idiot that laughed when he saw the magazines, instead of understanding it as provocations.

His great grandfather would have brought the wrath of the gods upon any journalist, any cameraman, any editor or magazine that would have dared write a single unflattering word about him or his family.

The pain in every nerve, every limb, sustains him. Dark Magic feeds on pain. Sirius feels it gathering inside him, watches the fire that starts burning in his eyes, how they come alive.

You can do this, his reflection tells Sirius, from the mirror. *Voldemort was the only man that could hurt you. No one else is allowed. You can do this. You are a Black, and they fear Blacks out there in the world. You just have to act like one, finally. You have to let them know you are your father's son, your great grandfather's heir, that you are the descendent of those great men from the past, a living reminder that House Black endured centuries of foes, destroyed all those that tried to bring it down.*

"Where are you going?" his relatives scream when he comes down the stairs.

"I'm going after Bellatrix," he says. "If I don't return, tell Regulus to look after Harry. It is my wish and my command; Harry must be kept safe."

He Apparates before his grandfather can grab him.

Only an hour before, he was the one flinching in the Ministry Atrium, overwhelmed by the crowds, by flashes of the camera, by the noise, all too much after the silence and emptiness of Azkaban.

Now, everyone around him finches as he strides to the elevators.

An alarm sounds all around, and he recalls that while Apparition inside the Ministry is possible, it should only be done with authorisation.

What are they going to do to me? Throw me in Azkaban?

Sirius laughs. Let them try. This time, he will fight, because his mother isn't there, he has no reason to want to protect anyone in this wretched building from the fallout. Let them try to take him again. He will die, but he will take dozens with him.

They bury Blacks with items they most loved in life, to keep them company on the journey to the stars, to the afterlife. Sometimes, they bury Blacks with a decapitated house-elf, to have a loyal servant, eternally, to serve them as they did in life.

Sirius will take blood with him, will take the souls of his enemies with him to the stars.

People flee from his path as he advances, laughing.

He's inside the elevator just as Aurors spill into the Atrium. Sirius waves his wand again, and the elevator gains more speed than it was meant to have.

The war is truly over, he thinks, shocked to see the Minister's office unguarded by Aurors, as it had been at all times while they were at war.

Now, when Sirius kicks open the door, only a secretary is there to scream at the sight of him, stand swiftly from behind her desk.

Sirius ignores her, moving forward to the next room-

He stops, turns to stare at her. "Who is the Minister?" He remembers his grandfather said they had to replace Bagnold to secure Sirius' trial.

"Mr… C-Cornelius F-Fu.." she stammers, eyes wide, backing away.

Sirius laughs again.

Well, this will be easier. Bagnold was a tough woman; Fudge is a weak vermin.

He barges into the office to see that small, undignified coward in his silly bowler hat.

He, too, screams.

Sirius slams the door behind him, locks it with Dark Magic.

"What is-"

"Congratulation on your promotion, Fudge," Sirius says, as he advances towards him.

Fudge backs himself into a row of shelves.

"Mr- Mr Black, what are you doing here?"

"No need to look so worried, Minister. I've come for a piece of paper. Why don't you sit?"

Sirius grabs a quill from the desk, and then he's toe to toe with the much shorter man, just as the Aurors are trying to open the door, banging on it, throwing spells at it.

"Take it," Sirius hisses.

Fudge takes the quill.

"Sit."

"Mr Black, I-"

"*Sit!*"

He sits.

Sirius hands him a fresh sheet of parchment he finds in a neatly arranged pile of them.

"Pardon Bellatrix Lestrange."

"I- what? Mr Black, I can't-"

Sirius slams his hand on the desk, crowds Fudge in his ridiculous chair, until they are face to face, noses touching.

"You'll do it, Fudge, or you will die today. Right here, in this office."

He meets those wet, fidgety eyes.

"I have nothing to lose," Sirius tells him, softly. "I died in Azkaban, already. There's nothing you can do to me. You can't punish me, you can't hurt me, you can't do anything to me. I'm dead, do you understand that, Fudge?"

"It wasn't me- It was Crouch- he was the one throwing people in Azkaban without trials- Crouch and Bagnold and- in fact, I am the one that revised the files and demanded you get a trial!"

"Yes, because my family put you in power for it. Now, listen here, you little worm: you can pardon her, and you will benefit from my gratitude and full support going forward, or you can die here, at this hideous desk of yours. Your choice. Best pick fast. Once the Aurors come through that door, your are a dead man. We will all be dead, you understand that?"

"Scrimgeour!" the man yells. "Scrimgeour, I am fine. Please, wait outside!"

The Aurors ignore him, keep trying to break through the door.

Good luck with that. Voldemort taught him this spell. Of course, if Voldemort was the one to cast it, then no one, *ever*, would open that door. Sirius doesn't have that kind of power, but the door should hold for a little while longer.

He laughs. “Seems your dogs don’t listen to you. You know why? Because you don’t inspire authority, Fudge. Everyone thinks you’re weak and a joke. That’s why Grandfather and Malfoy made you Minister. But, sign that paper, do as you’re told, and I will personally make sure you will be respected, Fudge. You’ll have a Black, Sirius Black, Death Eater extraordinaire, at your beck and call. You will call me if anyone disrespects you, and I will solve it.”

Even frightened and shaking, Fudge is a politician. Disgusting creatures, all of them. Immediately, he seems interested.

“The Wizengamot- Mr Back, this isn’t legal. I can pardon her, but only with their approval.”

“Oh, they’ll approve. No one will fight you over this, I assure you.”

“The inherited side, I am sure they- some of them, I am sure they will not question it. But the elected side-”

“Will find itself short of a few members, if they question you,” Sirius promises, as Aurors swear outside the door, bang against it, frustrated.

“The pubic will question me, too-”

“You are the Minister. You tell them they don’t get to question you. Grow a fucking backbone- if not, fine, I’ll be your backbone. Now sign the fucking pardon, or all these promises turn to ash, and you’ll never get home to change out of your sweaty robes.”

Fudge picks well. “This- Mr. Black, I can’t make her innocent, you understand that? She had her trial and she was found guilty. I can pardon her, grant her clemency, allow her freedom, but there will be restrictions on that freedom, and-”

“Just fucking do it.”

They’ll deal with restrictions and whatever nonsense after, if they survive it. Sirius only wants her home.

As Fudge quickly scribbles the pardon and the order of release with a shaking hand, Sirius wonders if it ever occurred to Cygnus or his grandfather to do this. Instead of plotting away for seven months, bribing, subtly threatening people, changing an entire Ministry- did it ever occur to them there was an easier way?

Probably not, because they wanted Sirius to be declared not guilty, not just pardoned.

Or perhaps, even if they had tried this approach, they wouldn’t have been believed. Perhaps his healthy grandfather and uncle, with their cold and collected expressions, wouldn’t have been believed they lost everything already, that they are perfectly willing to die on the spot if things don’t go their way.

Maybe Sirius, looking like a skeleton, hours after getting out of his cell, is more believable when he makes his death threats.

"You are like me," his great grandfather Sirius whispers in his ear, words slurred as he rocks Sirius in his arms. "You have the gift, boy. You can command the stars, you can find a path amongst them. A great power, and a terrible burden. None shall understand it, not even your father, and by the time you're old enough to use it, I shall be long dead. There will be no one to teach you, boy. People will fear you, even those that do not know what your blood can do. But they will sense that you are different, even the commoners. The way they sense it in me. You shall be feared, you will be watched with suspicion, as all great men are. You are my legacy, my moon child, my Heir."

Sirius understands almost nothing, but he pays attention, clings to those old shoulders, knowing it's a privilege. His great grandfather hugs no one, his great grandfather is mean, harsh, quick to hit them all if they upset him. Even his Father fears him. But his great grandfather loves Sirius, holds him often, whispers weird things in his ear.

"Marry Bellatrix," he says. "Marry her, and make more moon children. Marry Bellatrix, or the other two sisters, whatever they are named. I was a fool. I did not wish this burden on my son, so I married an outsider. A mistake- my son is weak. Even his son is weak, with all that iron will of his. But they are no moon children. You are. Make more."

When his great grandfather died, everyone was relived. Only Sirius' father missed him, and even so, he too seemed relieved to put the old terror to rest.

"*It is not a sad event,*" his mother kept saying, yet Sirius was sad, he felt very sad.

He felt alone, when they buried the casket under the ground. He almost cried, even if his parents prohibited from doing so. *"It is not a sad event, he was old,"* they kept saying, but Sirius didn't like it, didn't want him to be buried, not under the ground, so far from the stars his great grandfather loved and hated so much.

Sirius said, *"I am alone now, the last moon child," and his father shook his head, ran his fingers through his hair.*

"Do not pay any mind to his drunken ramblings," he insisted. "Forget about it, Sirius. Do not call upon the stars, do not wish upon them. They made grandfather mad, in the end. Ignore it, do not use it. The cost is too high, and I cannot guide you safely, because I do not know how to do it."

Mad or not, drunk or not, terror or not, his great grandfather is still remembered by the old folks, still whispered about with fear, even inside Sirius' own home.

His great grandfather would have absolutely come here and threaten a Minister, and he would have gotten his way. He wouldn't have plotted, he wouldn't have been civil about it, not a politician- that was Arcturus's way, Orion's way, but not the old man's.

"There," Fudge says, after he stamps the order of release, below his signature. "Now," he swallows. "Let me talk to the Aurors, and they can go retrieve her-"

"No need. I will go myself. Order your dogs to stand down."

Fudge does, still shaking.

He opens the door, once Sirius ends the curse placed on it. Scrimgeour and Robards spill inside the room, more men and women at their backs.

No Moody- probably the man resigned on the spot, once Sirius was declared free.

“All is fine,” Fudge assures them. “I forgot to tell you I had an appointment with Sirius-”

Sirius, is it?

“I sent an owl to invite him over, to apologise over the injustices our previous Minister inflicted upon him. I simply didn’t imagine he would come over today, so soon after his release, but he is a committed man.”

The Aurors rage, thunderous expressions on their stupid fucking faces. Sirius hates them so much, he feels alive again.

“Yes, we went over the injustices, Robards. The torture and such,” he spits, as he walks towards Robards. “You do remember it, don’t you?”

“Where is the dark lord?”

Pain, severe pain, all-consuming, as Robards’s wand points at him, and Sirius screams in his cell, writhes on the stone floor.

“Because I sure do.” Sirius meets his eyes. “I will never forget it.”

“What torture?” Fudge stammers.

Several Aurors look away, almost guilty. Others look shocked, frowning at Robarts.

That’s what I thought. He suspected many Aurors have no idea what goes on in Azkaban, what happens to some of the prisoners, the ones rumoured to be closest to Voldemort. That they have no clue what ‘interrogation’ methods their colleagues make use of.

“Oh, never mind,” Sirius says. “It’s between me and Robards. We’ll solve it like old mates, one day. That we will,” he promises.

He leaves, and doesn’t stop to think, *one step in front of the other*, until he reaches the Apparition point.

No need to think, just walk, he tells himself when his feet touch the stones, when that salty smell invades his nostrils again.

Blacks do not fear.

He marches to the gates, under Dementor scrutiny. They recognise him, and he wonders if someone remembered to tell them he’s not a prisoner anymore. They probably did, because he’s not attacked, as he moves under their shadows.

Which is for the best. Sirius would not be able to conjure a patrons; he wouldn't be able to conjure a happy enough memory for that.

The guards and the Aurors posted there are shocked to see him; he shoves the letter at them before they can speak.

He stares them down, as they check the signature, as they whisper amongst themselves.

"I don't have the entire day to waste here," he snarls. He already wasted seven months in that hell.

He's afraid, a part of his mind begs, crying, for Sirius to flee this place, the other asks him if he's crazy to return, but he silences all the voices.

Later. He can crumble later. Right now, he has a goal.

No one comes close to him, as two guards finally go away. The others remain, staring at him from a distance, wide eyed.

And then, after what feels like eternity, there she is, barley walking, supported by the guards.

She doesn't look like Bella, no more than Sirius looks like Sirius.

If he is skeletal, she is-

He has no word for the way her arms look. Like *nothing*. Like a bird could tear her arm apart with one small bite.

"Sirius?" she asks, dazed.

"Don't touch her," he barks, and the guards let her go as if burned, just in time for her to stumble into his arms.

"Sirius?"

"It's alright," he whispers, and then he supports her, even if his bones can barely support his own meagre weight.

Luckily, it's as if she's a feather. He would like to lift her, stroll out of there faster, but he knows he won't be able to.

Dementors start to gather, fast, as they come out.

"No," someone yells at them. "Let her be!"

The Dementors aren't happy, but they don't come closer.

"Sirius? Am I dreaming?"

"No. You'll be home soon," he promises her. "You just need to keep walking. One foot in front of the other."

“I-I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to. Keep walking. We’re going home.”

(-)

“Mind, body and soul,” Sirius says, when they Apparate in Grimmauld’s living room, and his family members all stand. “This is what that looks like.”

Sirius has never seen them so shocked; he’s never seen his grandfather with awe on his features.

As Druella and Cygnus hurry to Bellatrix, just as she collapses on the floor, Sirius goes on.

“You were right. I’m here, whatever is left of me. I’ll do whatever it will take for us to remain safe, powerful and together. I will go after Harry tomorrow, and it is my wish that even if you will never see him as blood family, that you will understand he is part of me, from now until the day I die.”

Both his grandfathers nod.

“Good,” Sirius wants to collapse. It occurs to him that he can; he’s home, after all. Safe. So he does. He lets himself fall into an armchair, and he starts shaking.

His mother is instantly at his side. “You’ll be fine. You’ll have the best Healers-”

“How did you get her out?” his grandfather asks.

“Had a talk with Fudge. He pardoned her. I’m sure you’ll have to talk to him and the Wizengamot about legalities and whatever, but I brought her home, that’s what most matters.”

His grandfather still looks awed. “Sirius, that is…” he trails off, apparently unable to think of a suitable word.

“What of Regulus? Was he in trouble at all?”

“No. They didn’t even want to question him.”

“Good, that’s good. And Andromeda? Dora?”

She only came to meet them because Voldemort was winning, because Sirius was there. Now he’ll have to threaten her again.

He sighs, exhausted.

“She saw Cygnus a couple of times, from my understanding.”

Bella realises this isn't all a dream, and she starts fighting the embrace of her parents.

"Where is he?" she licks her lips, stands, supporting herself on Cygnus. "Where is the dark lord?"

"Do not start with that!" one of the grandfathers says, Sirius isn't sure which, because he's looking at her.

"Dead," Sirius answers.

"He can't die," she hisses. "I- where is he? We have to look for him."

"Dear Merlin," his mother hisses. "What has he done to you?!"

"Give me a wand," she demands, looking around. No one hands her one, so she attacks her mother. It is a short fight, because Druella is crying, and heavily numbed by her potions and she doesn't resist much.

But Cygnus rips it away from Bella just as Bella grabs it.

"YOU'RE NOT STOPPING ME!" she yells. Sirius doesn't think he can stand again, he can barely summon enough energy to breathe, and there she is, making a scene.

Where does she get the energy, really?

Bella has always been the strongest amongst them all.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Cygnus says.

"What?" his mother hisses. "Have you lost your mind, brother?"

Cygnus gives Druella her wand back, but he pulls his own, hands it to Bellatrix. "We got you out by claiming you are insane," Cygnus lies, meeting her eyes.

She takes the wand. "I don't care what you said, I only need to-"

"They allowed you out, under house arrest. I was made responsible for you and your actions." Cygnus touches her face. "If you leave the house, then I shall pay for your crimes, sent to Azkaban for letting you flee."

"I- no, that's… no-" Bella shakes her head.

"Go on, darling. I won't hold you prisoner, like you accused me all your life of doing. So go on, to your lord. To your freedom. And leave me behind, to rot in Azkaban in your place. I'll gladly trade places with you."

She keeps shaking her head, desperate.

"No, no- NO. No, that can't be- I-"

"If he matters more to you than I… so be it."

“You don’t understand!” Bella is now backing away, eyes wild between tangled locks of hair. “I promised. I can’t abandon him in his time of need! And Rodolphus! Once my lord returns, he will free Rody-I-”

She keeps looking at them all, as if hoping someone would say something.

“Do it,” Cygnus keeps saying. “If it makes you happy, if you can have your lord and your husband back… what is my life, compared to that?”

“Daddy, stop!” Bella screams, frustrated. She grabs her hair, starts pulling. “STOP. SHUT UP!”

Cygnus goes to her, pulls her fingers out of her hair, kisses her forehead. “Why don’t you rest, first? It won’t do you any good to leave like this. They’ll catch you very fast. Rest, eat, recover. Then you can go.”

“I- put me back!” she demands, trying to push Cygnus away. “Put me back in Azkaban! I can’t be free and not look for my lord. No, I won’t take part in this treason, this betrayal. PUT ME BACK OR-” she swallows. “Or come with me, daddy! We can run together, find him!”

“No, darling. I love you, but I can’t abandon my wife, my other daughter, not willingly, not to look for a man that left chaos in his wake, allowed you and Sirius to be imprisoned. No.”

Bella becomes so irrational that shortly after, Druella slips close to her, and together with Cygnus they force a couple of Druella’s potions down her throat.

Cygnus sighs when Bella passes out. He takes her in his arms. “We’ll have to deal with these dramatics for a while, no way around it. But she won’t leave, that’s for sure. We won’t have to worry about her sneaking out.”

“You are certain?” his mother asks, doubtful.

“Very much so. She won’t betray me like that, not for her beloved Voldemort, not for Rodolphus, not for anyone.”

He walks out of the room, Bella in his arms, Druella trailing after them.

“Well,” grandfather Arcturus says, after a few seconds. “I better go talk with Abraxas and the rest, come up with something before we meet Fudge and the other side of the Wizengamot.”

“If someone needs killing, let me know,” Sirius says.

His mother flinches. Both his grandfathers turn to stare at him, shocked once more.

“*What?* I’m not giving Bella back, you understand? They either vote with you, or they don’t vote at all. I won’t risk it. If gold or threats don’t seem to work, don’t risk it, Grandfather. Tell me their names and point me in their direction.”

“Sirius. You aren’t an assassin-”

“I’ll be whatever this family needs me to be. Mind, body and soul, remember?” He stands. “Kreacher, draw me a bath.”

He needs another one, after going to Azkaban. Though he knows no amount of baths will truly wash it away.

“In which room?” Kreacher pops into view, right beside Sirius.

“Mine. The Master bedroom.”

(-)

He breaks down in the bathtub, everything catching up with him, now that his family is safe and free.

He can’t help it. The hot water, the candles- it reminds him of all those baths he took with Voldemort. Of how easy it was back then, how he knew, at the back of his head, that if he needs any help, if he has any issues, he can simply look to his side, and tell Voldemort about it.

He never did, but he knew he could. He knew Voldemort could solve anything, that Sirius didn’t have to worry about shit, if he didn’t want to.

It doesn’t help that the room smells like his father’s lotions, and that reminds him of a time when Sirius could ask *him* to solve all his troubles.

Even in the period between his father and Voldemort- Sirius had his friends. They didn’t have the power to do fuck all, but when Sirius was down, he would meet up with them, and just sitting with them, surrounded by their support and their love, was enough to help him move forward. James would make him laugh, an arm around his shoulders. Remus would say something sensible, that grounded Sirius. Peter would offer him snacks.

They’re all gone. All of them lost to him.

All he can see is his father unconscious, dying in his bed.

James crumpled down by the stairs.

Peter crying, hugging James, the last paragraph of the letter he left for his mother.

Remus’ distrusting eyes, the way he sat further and further away from Sirius, looking pained.

Voldemort, beside the crib, wand still between his fingers.

You can get him back, a weak side of him whispers. *His body is downstairs. You know the rituals. He taught you.*

“No,” Sirius says, and he realises all the hate he felt, once he was out of the Dementors’ reach, once his mind lost the numbness- it wasn’t for the Aurors, it wasn’t for politicians, Crouch or Fudge.

It’s for Voldemort.

He’ll never get Voldemort back, even if he resurrects him. He’ll never get the illusion back, the illusion of the man that would protect Sirius, would never betray him, never hurt him, that would solve all his problems.

Voldemort caused all his problems.

How can that still hurt? How can it still rip him apart, when there’s not much left of him, when he left his heart in Godric’s Holllow, on that Halloween night? His heart never got up with the rest of him, when Sirius finally let go of James’ body and stood up.

He left his soul in Azkaban, forgotten on that cold stone floor. He’ll never get it back. Whatever escaped Azkaban, whatever remains to him, whatever animates him- it will never be the same, yet he’s still hurting, it still rips him apart to think of Voldemort.

He might as well be back in Azkaban; he probably is, and all of this was an elaborate dream, a fantasy that someone saves him. That childish hope that his father, Voldemort, his grandfather, his uncle, someone loved him enough to save him, to want him back.

They never came for him, he’s convinced, shivering, so cold, so miserable. He’s still in Azkaban, wet and freezing, and all he can think about, all he can see is his father in his bed, unresponsive as Sirius weeps over him, James by the stairs, as Sirius lay with him on the floor, Voldemort staring ahead, his red eyes devoid of intelligence and fire.

He’ll never escape, this is all he’ll ever see-

“My brightest star,” a voice says. “My beautiful boy.”

There’s a splash- Sirius opens his eyes, and he’s in his bathtub, breathing hard, the water turning warmer and warmer around him. The candles have almost died out on the walls. He must have been there for quite a while, lost in his head.

“My firstborn,” his mother keeps saying, and she’s in the bathtub with him, lifting his torso, her robes wet and heavy, floating in the water, all around Sirius. “Come back to me, yes, there you go. Breathe,” her voice soothes him, drags him back to reality. “Everything will be alright.”

“I-”

Sirius doesn’t understand what happened to him, how seamlessly his mind slipped away, one moment in his father’s bathroom, the next in Azkaban, and now his mother is there, and he’s confused-

“It’s alright. I’m here. I know I wasn’t always, but I am here. My Sirius, my brightest star. You’re home, you’re safe. Your brother is safe. That monster is dead. No one will ever hurt

you again. I won't allow it, yes? Breathe."

He rests his head on her shoulder, tries to breathe normally. He shivers, cold and miserable, but one of her frail arms wraps around his back, draws him closer.

"You will heal," she tells him. "You will have the best Healers in the world, the best potions, and you will heal. You weren't there that long, the damage is reversible still, I asked, I asked many experts. You will heal from this." It sounds like an order.

Sirius always disobeyed her, even if he didn't want to, didn't set out to hurt her. He always ended up disappointing her. He doesn't want to do it again, but that word- 'heal'- it sounds foreign, impossible. It sounds like she's setting him up for failure again, because how can Sirius accomplish it?

"And what potions will heal me from finding my best friend dead? From knowing I had a part in his death?" he whispers, terrified that he has to live with that, forever. That he'll have to find a way to accept it.

How can he? How? It's impossible.

"His son will heal you," she says, determined, her fingers combing through his hair. "Little by little. You'll see. You'll have a piece of him with you. The best piece. Trust me when I say, our children are the best parts of us. What survived of Potter, is the purest part of him, the brightest. And you'll raise him, do right by him, won't you? That boy needs you stable, needs your love and care, and he'll love you back, as only children can love."

Harry. Yes. That's true. Sirius will see him soon, will hold him. Tomorrow.

"He killed Voldemort," Sirius whispers, finally voicing it. It doesn't sound real. "Harry."

His mother snorts, but she keeps her fingers so gentle in his hair. It makes Sirius remember he once felt safe in her arms. Long ago. So very long ago.

He was sick with dragonpox, so sick, and scared, but she never moved from his bed. She stayed with him, wiped his brow with cold cloths, sang to him, held water to his lips. She hugged him when he shivered.

"Mama, will I die?" he asks, because he'd never felt as sick in his life, and he leaned people can die from feeling sick.

"My brightest star, how do you think I'd let you die? Who would dare take you from my arms? Death? I'd destroy it if it even glances your way."

Sirius looks into her fierce eyes, and for a moment he thinks his mother is just as strong as his father, perhaps even more, because she seems capable of anything, of scaring death away.

"I may not be the most learned woman in the word, I didn't go to any Institute, but I have lived for some dozens of years now, Sirius, and I have traveled far and wide, read many books, met many people, heard many things. A baby cannot kill a grown wizard."

Sirius knows. He does. And yet-

“He died,” he says, and he shivers savagely. His mother’s arm clings harder to him. “I found him there. Dead. In front of Harry’s crib.”

He sees it, all over again. Voldemort’s body, his empty eyes, the wand between his fingers.

No, no, no. Stop. Sirius can’t, he *can’t* think of it. He bites his tongue, hard, he leans even more into his mother, inhales, and her perfume brings him back from the memory.

“Good riddance,” she spits, venomous.

All over Britain, people celebrated Voldemort’s death, Sirius knows. *‘Good riddance’.*

‘The monster is gone’.

‘Let him rot.’

It’s fair, Sirius knows it’s fair, that Voldemort caused so much pain, to everyone, his enemies or allies alike.

But it hurts. It hurts so much. He was always alone, that beautiful boy from the picture, the angelic child Sirius imagines, in some muggle orphanage, the fiercest dark lord in the world that cooked for Sirius, that held him in his arms at night. It *hurts.* It’s beyond painful.

“I loved him,” Sirius confesses, and his mother goes still, stiffens all over. “I slept with him. Ate with him. Lived in our- in his home. Will you abandon me, too, now?”

She should leave him. Sirius doesn’t deserve anything. He doesn’t understand why he still has his family, his sanctuary, when James is dead, when Voldemort is gone, alone and terrified somewhere.

Sirius deserves to be alone, too. They should have left him to rot in Azkaban. It’s what he deserves.

She takes a long time to answer. First, she resumes petting his hair, and eventually she rests her chin on his head. She sighs.

Just from that, Sirius can imagine how broken and pitiful he looks, exactly how he feels. He is in such a deplorable state, that she doesn’t spit on him, doesn’t call him a deviant, a disgrace, a stain on her family name.

“That takes longer to heal from,” she whispers. “Loving a hard, cold man isn’t easy. Even when they are heartless, even when they betray you, over and over again, it still hurts when they die.”

“How long?” Sirius asks. “How long does it take to heal from that?”

She hums. “I will tell you when I have an answer,” she says. “I’m still waiting. You can wait with me.”

She helps him out of the bathtub eventually, when his limbs aren't frozen anymore.

She tucks him in bed, gives him four or five potions, holds them to his lips.

"I'll be right here if you need me," she says, as he drifts to sleep. He hopes she thought to give him a Dreamless potion, too. "And Kreacher is always here, always watching, looking over us, even when we sleep. You saved him, you spared him. I knew you'd grow to have mercy on him one day."

"I hate his guts," Sirius mumbles, sinking into the best mattress in the world, warm and comfortable, the blanket a safe cocoon around him.

It's where he came as a child, to hide from nightmares, in this very bed. Only, the bed had his father there, back then.

The last thing he hears is her soft laughter.

Sirius wakes up at the crack of dawn, knowing he *needs* to do something, urgently.

His mother is fast asleep, curled on the other side of the bed, still in her day robes, all wrinkled now because she got them wet the night before. She doesn't seem to be resting well. Her jaws are clenched together, teeth grinding, her fists clenching and unclenching where she keeps them close to her chest.

He gets dressed, once again taking one of his father's robes. He'll need to get his own, soon.

The house is still dark, silent. They probably keep drugging Bellatrix, otherwise it wouldn't be so silent.

He feels like a ghost, walking those hallways, going down the stairs.

In the kitchen, he finds Kreacher, Tessuth and Dobby. Tessuth is dozing off, half sitting, half lying down, clutching some silverware, muttering in a language no one else speaks on earth.

Dobby is half inside a cupboard, not noticing Sirius, no doubt cleaning or searching for something.

Kreacher watches Sirius, silently, as Sirius goes down to the dungeon.

With trepidation, he opens the Heart of the house, but he closes his eyes before he does so.

He doesn't see, but he knows who lies there- what lies there.

It's just a body, he tells himself. *It's not him.*

It really isn't- Sirius could always feel Voldemort's magic hanging around him, powerful, indomitable. It's not there now. Nothing. Gone.

He sits on the floor, blindly, cuts his hand with his wand, places it over the stone, and he starts casting.

He feels the house taking shape inside him, he feels himself bleeding into the house, the longer he casts.

Brief impressions of how it changed, during centuries, how the world changed outside of it. He feels it growing stronger, coming alive with new blood- new, but *old*. The same blood it has been fed so many times.

Protect us, Sirius demands. *Hide us. Serve us.*

He only stops casting when he feels the house is awake again. Under his complete control. It will take a week or two to solidify, but it's there, already. It accepted him.

Sirius only opens his eyes when he leaves the room. Candles light on the walls, as he passes them by.

In the kitchen, Kreacher hisses insults at Dobby, slapping him with a rolling pin. The old elf stops to look at Sirius.

"Finally," he mutters, and then he goes back to calling Dobby all sorts of names, accusing him of not knowing how to do anything.

"Kreacher, breakfast will be served at eight o'clock, every morning," Sirius informs him. "As it used to be."

When he was a little boy, every time he was woken up for breakfast, he would think *'when I will be head of the house, I'll move breakfast to ten o'clock. I'll banish breakfast, actually. Just lunch'*.

Kreacher nods. "On weekends, at nine, for the Blacks to get some well deserve rest," he says. "Yes?"

"Yes. We'll start today." He can't imagine what schedule his drunk mother kept to in the last years. Though, apparently, his grandfathers are both here now, so maybe the schedule was already back in order. "Remind everyone this is mandatory. Except Bellatrix- let her…sleep."

"As Master orders, so it shall be."

"Dobby, prepare the nursery. My ward will come to live with us."

"Harry Potter?" Dobby asks, ears flopping around.

"Don't question Master, you insolent youngling!" Kreacher slaps him over the head.

Tessuth wakes briefly in the corner. She glares at them all, and turns on her side, goes back to sleep.

"Yes, Harry." A shiver runs through him. Even Dobby knows who Harry Potter is.

"Dobby is honoured to prepare the nursery! Dobby loves Harry Potter, he who defeated the evil Lord old Master Malfoy served-"

Sirius leaves them to their bickering.

(-)

He goes to his old…house. It never felt like home. It was empty, always empty, but now the floorboards are ripped apart, a part of the wall broken down.

Aurors, no doubt, searching for clues of Voldemort or proof of Sirius' wrong doings.

The ring isn't there.

Neither is the photograph of Tom Riddle. In fact, his entire nightstand is missing.

(-)

It's not even eight, so most people haven't arrived at the Ministry, not the important ones. Those start at nine, Sirius thinks.

But there are plenty of minions, or whatever they're called, milling about. Sirius goes to the department of Magical Law, asking about Harry.

No one knows where he is. All he gets is 'He was put under Headmaster Dumbledore's care, temporarily'.

Luckily, before Sirius' anger and frustration boil over into committing acts of violence, Amelia Bones shows up.

He can see the hate in her eyes, he remembers her entire family was massacred by Death Eaters, save for a niece or something.

"Listen," Sirius barks at her. "He is my ward. I have all rights to him, his father placed him under my care. I'm sure you have all the papers, we registered them when we did the ritual. Do not make me call Wilkes over, you know how much he loves to talk. And do not make me grow more angry with the Ministry's incompetence- I've already been wronged by this institution, thrown in prison as an innocent man- you don't wish for me to grow more upset, Miss Bones, I assure you."

Begrudgingly, she hands him the papers.

Dumbledore sent Harry to live with his relatives, with Lily's sister. Sirius forgot Harry has blood relatives. For once, Dumbledore acted lawfully, did what he was supposed to do,

reunite Harry with blood family, even if just muggles, in the absence of magical one, and in the absence of Harry's Guardian.

It's so early, Sirius tells himself. *He probably doesn't remember me.* He decides he'll go take him in the afternoon. Give the boy time to wake up, his relatives to wake up, eat. He can't just show up so early and take the boy. They'll need to talk, he needs some muggle money, to pay those people back for whatever expenses Harry caused them. It's only proper.

Sirius should make a good impression, get along with them, keep some ties. He thinks Lily wasn't on good terms with her sister when she died, but it was her sister. Harry's aunt. And no matter what misunderstanding occurred between them, the woman received Harry in her home, she is taking care of him.

Family matters, Sirius supposes even muggle one. He can't just barge in and scare them, ruin Harry's chances of having an aunt in his life, that would be able to tell him about his mother's childhood. Sirius has no idea about that, about Lily's parents, he can't tell Harry anything about it.

He goes to the Department of Law Enforcement, even if his skin crawls on his way in.

Dawlish is there to greet him, first.

He spat in my water, Sirius remembers.

All in good time, he tells himself. *Everyone will pay, keep your calm.*

"You confiscated things from my house. I require them back."

"Wait here," Dawlish spits out, and then he leaves for the Archive.

All the Aurors stare at him, with unfriendly eyes. Sirius stares right back. Perhaps not all hate him, there are a couple of friendly face, some guilty ones that try to nod at him, but they are few and far between, and Sirius decided he'll hate them all. Not just for Azkaban, no. It's simply his duty to see these people as enemies.

Everyone that is not a Black is an enemy, his family always said, and they were right about absolutely everything.

Dawlish comes back, empty-handed. Well, he has a paper, that he reads out loud.

"Your grandfather demanded them days after your arrest. Dumbledore wanted them, too, but he had no claim to any of it. Your grandfather came with Wilkes, and with orders from higher up, claiming your shit as family property, so we relinquished them to him. Some clothes, two packs of muggle tobacco rolled into papers, fourteen bottles of alcohol, a ring, and a nightstand. Not that it matters to anyone, apparently," he glares at Sirius, "but the nightstand was warded with illegal dark, blood magic, so it was never opened by this department. If something is missing from it, take it up with that old man-"

"With Mr Black," Sirius says, softly. "He is Mr Black for you, and I will advise you to watch your tone when speaking to me, Auror."

Dawlish sneers at him. Sirius offers a sneer of his own, before he turns his back to those miserable people, and goes on his way.

Gods, he thinks. His grandfather came through again. If Dumbledore would have gotten his hands on the ring, figured out it was a Horcrux…

What? What would have happened? He'd have destroyed it, as you should.

(-)

During breakfast, a very subdued affair, Sirius learns that his grandparents, his aunt and uncle, had all come to live at Grimmauld after Sirius and Bellatrix were arrested.

That would explain Tessuth sleeping in the kitchen.

Poor Mother, he thinks, as he plays with his food. He can't believe he has food again, a veritable feast laid out before him. He doesn't take one bite, moving things on his plate with his fork. *She must have had a hard time, what with her own mum breathing down her neck, with Arcturus…*

Druella isn't at the table, had sent her apologies to Sirius, but someone is needed to be at Belatrix' side, to pour potions down her throat.

His mother isn't eating, either, watching Sirius with hawk eyes. He can feel her wanting to tell him to eat, but she doesn't. No one admonishes him, not when he sits on his father's chair, at the head of the table.

"Regulus will come home Saturday," Grandfather Arcturus says. "He sent a later late last night. Apparently, we can't stop him from returning, now that you are free. His semester just ended, in any case "

Sirius nods, and he feels a tiny flash of…something good, thinking about seeing his little brother again.

After breakfast, he crawls back to his fath- to his bedroom, exhausted, in pain.

All his muscles ache, his lower back is killing him, his shoulders burn, he's out of breath after he climbs the stairs, and it's not even nine in the morning.

He's afraid to go to sleep, though, without a dreamless potion. And if he takes a potion, he won't wake up for a long time, and he wants to go for Harry. He needs to.

The door opens, mysteriously, but no person comes inside, just a dog. For a second, Sirius stares at it, from his bed, not understanding.

They stare at each other, and only when he sees the blue eyes he remembers.

All memories with Snuffles were good, so they were non existent inside Azkaban.

He's friendly, curious, and awfully behaved, Sirius notices, when, after he sniffs around Sirius for a few seconds, he jumps straight into bed with him.

As if he's used to sleeping in a bed.

In no time at all, he's licking Sirius' face.

He spends an hour watching Snuffles roaming around the room, sniffing every corner, howling for no reason, and jumping on the bed from time to time.

It's…good. It gives Sirius something to do. He can rest his body, but he can focus on Snuffles, instead of the Dementors waiting in his head, James' body, Voldemort-

"Come here, boy," he asks, and Snuffles obliges, jumping back in bed, howling like a mad dog.

Sirius almost smiles- he remembers he decided to buy his mum a husky, because, like her, they never shut up.

At ten, the Healers come. Three of them, his mother trailing behind.

"I'm fine," Sirius says, reflexively, when they start moving their wands above him.

"You won't get anything out of him," Old Hartwood, their family Healer, says to the others. "I once found him with his bone sticking out of his skin and he said he was fine, then, too."

Sirius can't remember that occasion, but then he'd broken his arms a few times as a child, doing all sort of stupid shit, and Hartwood was always called to fix him.

They cast diagnostic spells at him, mutter between themselves, one of them writing furiously on a piece of parchment.

"You should see Bellatrix," Sirius suggests, after some minutes.

"We will attend to her shortly."

When it ends, Hartwood and his mother whisper by the door.

Sirius hears her voicing concern that he's thin. "No, you don't understand how thin he is. You can't see it with the robe, but he's incredibly *fragile*."

He hears Heartwood expressing wonder at how sane Sirius appears. "Then again, he's always been a resilient boy."

Half an hour after they left, Kreacher pops inside the room, with an enormous tray filled with potions.

He places them on the nightstand. "For how many weeks are those?" Sirius asks.

“For today,” Kreacher answers. “Take them. Kreacher will stay here to see you swallow them all.”

(-)

He owns no muggle clothes, so he gets weird looks when he walks up Privet Drive. And he doesn’t even have a robe on, he put on some leather riding trousers and a shirt he found in the attic, but he knows that’s still notably different from what most muggles wear.

Or maybe they are staring at his skeletal form. He doesn’t care, more concerned with finding number four, ignoring the faces of house-wives plastered at their kitchen windows, watching him move around.

Dumbledore posted outside a house makes it obvious that’s the one he’s looking for.

Somehow, no one looks at him, even if he’s in a vibrant blue robe, with pink details on the hems.

“We both know Voldemort is not dead,” he says, as soon as Sirius is in hearing range. “He will return. And Harry-”

“Harry is mine,” Sirius spits, walking past him. Or trying to.

Suddenly, Dumbledore is in his path. “I must confess, I do not know what to think of your trial.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think of it. Move.”

“I don’t know where your heart is, Sirius, to whom your loyalties belong, but if you care about Harry, this is the safest place-“

“My loyalties belong to my family. Step out of the way, old man, or I shall remove you.”

A bold, empty threat. Dumbledore isn’t impressed. He doesn’t bulge.

“You mean Harry no harm,” he says. “That much is obvious, since you were able to step through the blood wards. I put them in place myself.”

“Did you? Isn’t that Dark Magic?” Sirius snarls.

“So I am certain you are well intentioned. But if you truly care about the boy’s wellbeing, this is where he’s safest. Within these wards, with his blood family.”

“You know what’s safer than that? Grimmauld Place. That, too, is protected by blood wards, only it’s a magical, ancient, almost sentient fortress. Oh, and there are wizards and witches inside it, to serve as extra protection. Move!”

They stare at each other. Those old eyes are as all knowing as always, as piercing.

He lets Sirius pass but follows after him.

They find Harry in a cupboard under the stairs, in too big clothes and with no toys. He's shy and small, too small, with an awful lighting shaped scar over his forehead. His arms are as skinny as Bella's.

Sirius sees red. He *snaps*, and he's only half aware when he's slamming a fat man against a wall, his fingers tightening around a meaty neck.

A woman screams, tries to pull him away. Sirius slaps her, and she falls at his feet.

Never hit a woman, his father says, but surely, even his father would have hit this thing.

Magic pulls him away from the man.

In a second, the sunny house turns dark, blinders covering the windows.

Sirius tries to move, but he cannot. He never felt Dumbledore's magic directed against him, he never taught them in class, he never fought beside them in the Order-

It's indomitable. Sirius can't even blink.

The muggles are equally frozen in place, the man against the wall, the woman on the floor. The door to the cupboard closes, covering Harry's cries, and only when another crying toddler turns around, as if directed, to look at a painting on the wall instead of screaming at them, does Sirius realise there was another child in the house.

Dumbledore stands before him.

"Calm down, Sirius."

He tries to speak, can't- Dumbledore makes a small gesture with his hand, and now Sirius can speak. "Calm down? Did you see him? Did you-"

"I might wear glasses, but I am not blind."

"Safe? You said it's safe for him here?" Sirius would strangle Dumbledore, too, if he could.

"Will he be safer in your home, at your side, if you are so willing to strangle and hit people at the drop of a hat?"

"I would never hurt him!" Sirius yells, and Harry's cries come louder from the cupboard. The other little boy wails just as hard, calling for his mother.

"You're scaring him already. You don't have to hurt him physically, but if this is how you will behave around him, then perhaps I should take Harry."

"You can't! He's mine, by law-"

“Who do you think will stop me?”

Sirius’ anger gets worse, but fear rises with it, fear that he’ll lose Harry, that the last promise he made to James will turn to ash.

He understands then, in that moment, that no one can touch Dumbledore- it’s just as with Voldemort. If Dumbledore wants to take Harry, there’s no soul in the world, no battalion of Aurors to stop him.

It’s easy to forget, with his silly robes, and his white beard, and his twinkling eyes, that Dumbledore has no match, that he fears no one. Not even Sirius’ family, that was enough sometimes to keep Voldemort’s worst impulses at bay.

Arcturus Black was Voldemort’s elder, was a respected wizard, a cunning man Voldemort had to thread carefully around if he didn’t want half his army to abandon him. But Arcturus Black is a child to Dumbledore. This old man had once taught the might Arcturus how to turn a hedgehog into a pin.

He swallows. “I’ve only been out of Azkaban for a few days. I’ve been out of the Ministry cell for one day. I- I’m still…I’m adjusting, but I’ll be alright. I won’t hurt Harry-”

“Understandable,” Dumbledore says. “Yet you’ve always had a quick temper, though I am sure Azkaban only made it worse.”

“I’ll get better,” Sirius hisses at him. “I’ve got healers and potions and everything. Harry will be safe with me. I’m calm, release me. I’m calm!”

He doesn’t sound calm, even to his own ears, but Dumbledore releases him from the spell, anyway.

Sirius makes sure not to move, not to spit on him, not to dash into the cupboard in an attempt to flee with Harry.

“He’s my ward. It was James’- I gave my word to James that I will raise Harry.”

“Look at me,” Dumbledore says, softly, and Sirius meets those too blue eyes again. “You were not the Secret Keeper?”

“You were at the trial-”

“And I know Voldemort trained his inner circle to resist Veritaserum.”

“I wasn’t the Secret Keeper,” Sirius says, holding his gaze.

“Why?”

“Lily didn’t trust me.”

“Why?”

There's no Legilimency involved, but, like Voldemort, Dumbledore never seemed to need it. He will know if he's lied to, either way.

"Because she suspected something is not right with me. That I…" he trails off. Breathes in again. "I don't know what she suspected, exactly. She never said it."

"Where is Voldemort?"

"I buried him," Sirius says. He did. In his dungeon, in the Heart of his house. "I was there that morning. Before Hagrid. I took Voldemort's body and buried him."

"Where?"

"Somewhere where he cannot be found by any of his loyal followers. I swear it!"

"You lied to me when you told me you abandoned him. Did you, ever?"

"I left him when I found out. About James; that he was after James- Harry, I mean."

It was always James, for Sirius. He always tried to protect James, and Harry was a part of him. Threats against Harry were threats against James, in Sirius' mind. Pain inflicted upon Harry, was pain inflicted upon James.

Dumbledore stares into his very being, moments on end. He steps back. "And Bellatrix? Will you expose Harry to her? I attended her trial, Sirius, and, despite your lies, she seemed very aware of what she was doing. I have never seen devotion burn so bright in someone's eyes. What do you think she will do to Harry?"

Struck, Sirius hesitates. How did he not think of that?

"She won't touch him," he says, after a second or two. "I won't allow it."

He'll have to move her. Send her to live with her father.

"I won't allow anyone to hurt Harry," Sirius says, and he hopes Dumbledore can see devotion in his eyes, too.

He must, because he gestures at the cupboard after a few more seconds. "Go, then. I shall deal with these …people."

Sirius doesn't need to be told twice.

Harry is frightened, flinches away from Sirius, not recognising him. But there's no time to put him at ease.

Sirius takes him in his arms, and his heart breaks all over again, but it's also- it's Harry. The last piece of James that remains to Sirius.

He hurries out of the house, just as Dumbledore releases the muggles from the spell.

Sirius never truly realised how terrifying Dumbledore can be. He knew he was an exceptional wizard, but he never quite understood it until he witnessed his power on his own. Nothing showy about it, no grand gestures, no earth splitting spells, no slaughter- just those ancient, wrinkled eyes and his old, steady magic.

With Voldemort gone, the only one that had a chance against Dumbledore, there will never come another to grow even close to defeating the old man.

(-)

Hours later, Cygnus takes Bellatrix to his house; she's still - not exactly unconscious- but unaware of her surroundings as she walks, with her father's arm around her waist, with her head supported on his shoulder, Druella fussing around them, whispering nonsense into Bella's ear.

The nursery is ready. Dobby did a good job of it. It looks brighter than Sirius remembers. His mother scoffs at all the bright suns and fluffy clouds Dobby painted over the skull and star wallpapers.

The crib is bright blue, also freshly painted. Sirius is sure this was Regulus' old one, which was once black.

"You'll be in charge of Harry, not Kreacher," Sirius informs Dobby.

"It will be an honour, Master. Dobby is only one hundred years old, he doesn't have much experience with babies, but Dobby took care of former Master Lucius when he was born! Dobby kept him alive!"

Harry stopped crying, but he's still fearful.

He looks so much like James. More so than Sirius remembered. And his eyes- those are Lily's eyes, replicated to perfection.

"What happened to his forehead?" his mother asks, the only one that expressed an interest in meeting Harry.

"From that night. I don't know what it is, we'll have to ask Hartwood."

Didn't Dumbledore bother to heal Harry, before placing him with those horrid muggles?

"Is he mute?"

They're both staring at Harry, who stares back, terrified, huddled in the corner of the huge crib, tiny knees to his chest.

“No-I don’t think so. He could talk, before. A few words. And he cried, earlier today. He’s probably just- the muggles kept him in a closet.”

“Filthy animals,” his mother sneers. “Pigs that walk upright, those muggles. No soul, no magic, no intelligence.”

Muggles should never touch magical children, of that, Sirius is certain.

Not after what he just saw. After all those stories Voldemort told him of the orphanage.

“Mother?”

“What?”

“Can you please buy him clothes? I - I want to stay with him.”

Sirius doesn’t want to leave the house for a while. Not after Dumbledore. He truly isn’t safe out there, his family was always right.

“I suppose I shall.”

Eventually, he will have to leave, to buy Harry normal clothes, not whatever stuffy things his mother will get.

Sirius will buy him toys, fun ones, modern ones. He’ll buy everything for Harry.

When alone, Sirius attempts to approach the crib again.

“Hey,” Sirius whispers. “Hey, I’m Sirius. I know you don’t remember me, but I was - you loved me, once. We got along great, yeah? I’m Pady.”

Nothing.

Maybe if I turn into Padfoot?

But what if that scares Harry more? He’s been with muggles for close to a year. He most likely forgot magical things happening around him.

Snuffles saves the day, when Sirius thinks to bring him in. Harry defrosts in no time when faced with that friendly, enthusiastic ball of energy, with that soft fur and raspy tongue.

He opens the bars of the crib on his own, climbs down carefully.

His little hands grab onto Snuffles ears, and he finally smiles, a small, trembling thing.

“Doggie,” Harry whispers. “Woof!”

“He can’t do ‘woof’,” Sirius says, on his knees, inching closer to Harry and Snuffles. “He can only howl. Like so.”

Sirius howls, and Snuffles immediately does it as well. It makes Harry smile wider, and Sirius gets closer, still.

“Hey, I’m sorry about earlier. I was upset, but I promise you won’t see me upset again.” Sirius imagines Harry can’t understand much of what he’s saying, but he still talks, and Harry does look at him now. “It’s just that I was - your aunt was-”

“Aunt?” Harry’s smile disappears. He frowns.

“You won’t have to see her ever again. You’ll stay here with- with Snuffles.” Sirius is very close now, and this time Harry doesn’t flinch, even if he’s still grabbing onto Snuffles’ fur. Sirius pets the dog, and he receives a lick to the face as well.

It makes Harry giggle.

When Dobby brings them food, tiny sandwiches cut to look like dragons, Harry looks at them with awe, and then when Sirius invites him to eat, he take the first one cautiously, watching Sirius all the time.

“More?” he asks Sirius, uncertain, once he finishes his first.

“Yes. You can eat them all. They’re yours.”

And Harry eats, pulling the plate closer to him. He eats, and eats, and Sirius’ anger tries to boil again, whispers in his head to wait for nightfall and go after the muggles, kill them slowly.

As hungry as he is, Harry is not upset when Snuffles steals a couple of those little sandwiches. In fact, Harry divides what is left, carefully, and seems so happy and willing to share. And then, he offers one to Sirius.

This is James’ son, without any doubt- kind, selfless, just too good to exist in this shitty world. Sirius feels tears gathering in his eyes, his chest aches, painfully.

He takes the sandwich.

It’s the first thing he eats since he was taken out of Azkaban. It’s the first thing he eats that isn’t awful gruel in seven months.

It tastes like hope.

(-)

Harry likes Dobby, though he watches him curiously whenever he shows up. “What animal?” he asks, confused.

“Dobby is a house-elf. He’ll help you bathe, yes?”

Sirius doesn’t trust himself not to drown Harry, or get shampoo in his eyes, or- he has no idea about any of that.

But he watches from the doorway, and Harry seems to like the bathtub very much, even if it is not filled, even if Dobby just pours water on him with a small pot, washing him gently.

He likes his new clothes, when his mother leaves them outside the door.

“You pick,” Sirius says, arranging dozens of little robes, and little shirts and trousers. All incredibly stuffy, all black. He waves his wand, and some turn green and blue, and Harry loves that.

“How?” he asks, excited.

“Magic.” Clearly, Harry doesn’t know what that means, but he picks a blue robe.

Dobby procures some toys from the attic, Sirius’ and Regulus’ old ones. And Harry loves those the most, once they’re cleared of dust. He hugs a big plush dog, bigger than him, tightly.

“Mine?” he keeps asking, doubtful, whenever Sirius reassure him he can touch anything, he can have anything.

He eats again, this time some dubious-looking soup, but Harry seems to like it very much. He lets Dobby help him, waits obediently for every spoon, with his mouth open.

He falls asleep, eventually, clearly exhausted, clutching the plush dog; he put a dragon toy in his crib as well, and a snitch made of soft cotton.

(-)

Sirius reuses to leave the nursery, to his mother’s displeasure. But he accepts to take his potions. Six vials every morning, seven at lunch, and nine at night.

They do give him an appetite.

“The healers say you should exercise, slowly at first. That you should take long walks, and be exposed to sunlight. “

“We’re in London, we don’t have sunlight,” Sirius barks at her.

“We do. It’s June, and it’s sunny. The boy needs all that, too.”

So, because Harry needs it, Sirius takes him and Snuffles to the park closest to Grimmauld.

In just five days, Harry starts smiling. He laughs, and once he first holds Sirius' hands, he never wants to let go.

He's as touch starved as Sirius, and they like to hold on to each other, at all times.

When Sirius has a moment, when a sudden noise startles him, or when his mind slips away, to Azkaban, to James' body, to Voldemort's-

Snuffles seems to sense it, and he licks Sirius' face, howls, drawing Sirius back to reality.

On the fifth day, tired and in pain from sleeping on the armchair in the nursery, Sirius takes Harry to his fathe- to his bedroom.

And Harry loves that, too, loves to snuggle with Sirius under the blanket.

He's been talking more and more, and before he goes to sleep, he says: "You and Snuffy. No more Aunt."

"You'll always be with me, and with Snuffles," Sirius assures him, and after Harry falls asleep, he takes his many, many potions; some of them help him sleep, with no dreams, no nightmares, just Harry's small body in his arms, Snuffle's weight at his feet.

"Wake me if he needs something, yes?" Sirius instructs Snuffles, whispering. He fears the potions will make him sleep too deeply, and if Harry calls his name in that soft voice of his, maybe Sirius won't hear him. But Snuffles is there- Snuffles can wake up the dead, when he wants to.

And there's Dobby, who surely pops in non-stop, out of sight, out of mind, but there to observe Harry, make sure he's fine, even if Sirius is asleep.

(-)

"It's certainly dark magic, but …" Hartwood frowns, wand on Harry's forehead. "I've never encountered such a thing before. It is not a wound- it doesn't affect him- the boy is perfectly healthy. Well, a tad malnourished and I am positive he'll need glasses sooner rather than later," he adds, performing the diagnostic charms again. "Other than that, whatever this is, it isn't harming him. Perhaps a residue from the Killing Curse, though that is unheard of."

"Of course it's from the Killing Curse," Sirius snaps at him. "Look at the shape. It's typical." When a Killing Curse doesn't connect with a living thing, when it hits a wall, or a tree or any surfaces, it always leaves behind a lightning bolt shape scorch mark in its wake.

"I wouldn't know it, Sirius. I can't say I've ever cast the Killing Curse."

Sirius' teeth grind together for a few seconds. "It's Mr Black," he informs Hartwood.

“As you say, Mr Black. There’s nothing to do about the scar. I can’t heal it- injuries left by dark magic are, as you know, untreatable. But he is in good health, I can promise that. Make sure to feed him well, and you needn’t worry about the scar.”

(-)

His grandfather and Cygnus both study Harry with interest. The defeater of Voldemort. The Boy-Who-Lived, they call him, out there in the world.

Sirius struggles with the knowledge of how famous Harry is, what a weight comes with that title. He hugs Harry tighter when he thinks of it.

“Somehow, everyone knows about the scar,” Cygnus says, coming closer, moving Harry’s fringe a bit out of the way to see the scar.

“The giant, Hagrid, has a blabber mouth. Told everyone that would listen about it,” his grandfather adds. He, too, is staring at the scar, with a small frown.

Harry turns shy under the scrutiny, hides his face in Sirius’ chest.

“What do you think? What happened there?” Sirius asks him. If anyone should know…his grandfather had seen many things in his life.

“Many suppositions are being offered,” he says, slowly. “There will be many books written about it. But nobody will ever know for sure. Dumbledore’s theories say it was love that saved the boy.”

Sirius scoffs.

“Don’t scoff,” his grandfather reprimands him. “Emotion is a powerful conduit for dark magic. Love sometimes wraps into possessiveness, and that can turn into anger, which would fuel-”

“Lily didn’t know dark magic, nor did James.”

“Even if they knew it,” Cygnus adds,“we all know many cases in which people fell to the Killing Curse, whether they were loved or protected by charms or curses. Nothing stops the Killing Curse.”

Sirius sighs. “He did.”

Harry squirms in his lap. He’s extraordinarily shy. Sirius should encourage him to talk to other kids at the park, or play, of whatever two-year-olds do, only Sirius isn’t keen on approaching people, either.

He takes Harry to the park when he knows not many people will be there- and if they are there, sometimes Sirius waves his wand and the muggles…go away, suddenly remembering urgent business they have elsewhere.

He has this panicked feeling in his stomach whenever he leaves the house, especially in crowded places. He almost killed someone at the muggle store when he went to buy cigarettes. Someone touched him, accidentally, and it sent Sirius in such a panic, he is certain he'd have done something regrettable if Harry wasn't in his arms, if Snuffles hadn't immediately chased away the person, an elderly woman.

(-)

Regulus comes home seven days after Sirius' trial.

They hug in the hallway. Touching Regulus doesn't send Sirius in a panic, even if his brother's hold is tight, suffocating almost. But it's Regulus.

Regulus, who even if still a couple of inches shorter than Sirius, is now sturdier. Regulus was always on the lean side, yet now Sirius could easily hide behind him.

It doesn't matter, he tells himself. He's already gaining a bit of weight back, with all those potions and all the food, and it's only been a week.

Regulus is only there for the summer, before his next semester starts in September.

"Don't be an arse to Harry. I won't put up with it," Sirius informs him.

"Alright," Regulus says, and he looks at Sirius as if Sirius is fragile, as if he might break apart at any second if he becomes upset.

It hurts, even though it's probably true.

Regulus does his best to give a short nod to Harry, offer him a grimace that supposedly is meant to be a smile. He even says 'hello'.

It's enough for now.

Sirius has yet to eat with his family, because neither his mother nor his grandparents want Harry in the dining room or kitchen. Not on account of his blood, but because 'no toddler should sit with adults at the table'.

So Sirius ate with Harry, in the nursery, under Dobby's surveillance. Sirius has a feeling Dobby hangs around more to make sure Sirius eats, rather than Harry, who is not at all fussy with his food, accepts whatever he's given.

But, with Regulus home, Sirius eats with his family. Harry will be fine with Dobby and Snuffles.

“We should go back to France, soon,” Grandmother Irma says after the first course.

“Yes,” his mother is quick to agree. “I appreciate that you kept me company in these trying times, Mother, but it is time you head home, now that you’ve seen Regulus, too.”

“We’ll leave next week, then. Pollux?”

“Fine.” The man doesn’t look too happy about it, but he always did whatever his wife told him.

“I should return to my home, as well-”

“No!” Sirius almost shouts at Arcturus. He breathes in. “I mean, no, Grandfather. Stay a bit longer. I’m still busy with getting to know Harry and everything,” Sirius says, lamely.

He feels safer with his grandfather there.

He gets an understanding look, and a curt nod. “I shall stay until you marry, then. I have a couple of suggestions for you-”

“He is *not* marrying that insufferable little mouse,” his mother snaps. “Over my dead body. Now, Sirius, I did talk with Violet and-”

“You must have lost your mind, Walburga, if you think Violet’s daughters are fit for our House-”

Sirius drones them out. “So, how is Egypt?” he asks Regulus.

(-)

That night, Lucius and Narcissa arrive for dinner. Sirius gets a hug from both. Narcissa even kisses his cheek.

“Where’s Draco?”

“With Mother,” Narcissa says. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be well enough to…put up with a toddler.”

“I think I’m more equipped than Druella. Merlin, you left him alone with *Druella*?”

“I don’t like it either,” Lucius says. “But the other option was Father, and- better Druella. The elves are there, anyway.”

“And who is watching Bella?”

“Father,” Narcissa says. Her eyes cloud with worry. Sirius almost asks her what news she has of Bella, how is she fairing, but he doesn’t.

Over dinner, Grandmother Irma picks on Lucius as soon as they sit down, and it’s almost normal for a second. Almost good.

But Sirius doesn’t know how to feel good anymore.

(-)

After dinner, Cissa heads home to Draco. Lucius lingers, and Sirius takes him to an empty dining room. He’s not supposed to drink, he thinks he remembers the Healers saying so, but who is going to stop him?

“What happened?” he asks, offering Lucius a glass.

“Arcturus woke me up,” Lucius recounts. “I already knew when the elf shook me awake, telling me your grandfather demanded to see me. As I dressed, I looked at my mark and…it was fading. And then Arcturus told me the dark lord fell.”

The old man told the Lestranges, next, according to Lucius.

Sirius does not want to ever know how they took the news, those first few moments when they heard it.

“They came to the Manor,” Lucius says. “By then, Father already advised me to go to the Ministry, say I woke up from the Imperius, suddenly, that morning.” Lucius’ jaw twitches. “I begged- I *begged* Bellatrix to do the same. She spat in my face, called me a coward and a traitor, and off she went. Of course, Rodolphus went with her, and Rabastan after him. The news that you were arrested came only hours later; I was already in front of Crouch, giving a confession. He wanted me arrested- well, he had me arrested, but since I came voluntarily, I was placed on house arrest, until I could stand trial. The next day they arrested the Lestranges. Karkaroff begged for a new trial, soon after that. He snitched on everyone he could. On Rookwood…” Lucius’ jaw twists again. “Avery said he was under the Imperius as well. Walden claimed he was forced into it, under threats to Evy’s life. He said the dark lord killed Paul, to show him he’s not joking.”

Sirius snorts.

“No one even questioned Porus. His great uncle was known for his hatred of the dark lord. It was assumed Porus followed his footsteps.”

Most Death Eaters got away- most rich Death Eaters, that is, or those that had rich friends. Crabbe and Goyle claimed they were under duress, too, that threats were made to their lives, their wives’ lives; that they didn’t do ‘much’, simply gave Voldemort some gold. Nott

escaped a trial all together, managed to convince whoever interviewed him to not even charge him.

“Dolohov refused to renounce *him*. Same for Travers. If they had, we could have gotten them out, too, but they were adamant they would rather rot in Azkaban before betraying the dark lord. Rookwood tried to get out of it, but they found too much evidence. They suspected already there was a Death Eater with the Unspeakables. I tried to get him out, I paid for his jurists, but it was in vain.”

“Yaxley?”

“Corban is fine,” Lucius says, with a tiny smile. “He wasn’t suspected at all.”

“What happened at Bella’s trial?”

Though he can imagine it already.

“It was- *Merlin*!” Lucius takes a gulp out of his drink. “We wanted her to be judged separately from Rodolphus and Rabastan, but Crouch opposed us at all corners. He was fanatical about it, since his son was caught with them. Cygnus begged Bella to renounce the dark lord, he already made sure the Wizengamot will spare her, he paid everyone that needed paying, he threatened everyone that needed threatening. *‘She’s just a stupid woman, she only did as she was told’* he kept saying. But then Bella came in and -well. You can imagine. Rodolphus and Rabastan stayed quiet, but she made a show of her devotion. Barty kept weeping. It was horrific.”

“What did they do? I think Grandfather and Moody said they tortured someone-”

“The Longbottoms.”

Oh.

“Are they-”

“Gone. Alive, but *gone*. No Mind Healer will put them back to rights. The Cruciatus.”

Sirius does not want to imagine it, Bella torturing people.

“And the boy? Neville, was it?”

Lucius gives him an odd look. “They didn’t touch the baby; they aren’t as monstrous as… that.”

The implication, the unsaid ‘like others’, is very loud, even if unspoken.

Sirius downs his drink. “Thank you,” he says. “For what you said at my trial-”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Lucius dismisses him. “We’re family. We stand up for each other. You’d have done the same for me. You did more for Bella. You have no idea what they’re saying about you, do you? You went to Azkaban, hours after your release, and got Bellatrix back.”

Lucius looks at him, almost with reverence.

“I abandoned you,” Sirius insists. “Again.”

“You didn’t abandon us.” Lucius looks into the flames, dancing in the fireplace. “Many of us would have abandoned *him*, when we heard he was hunting a baby. But we did not have the courage. You- you don’t- you weren’t truly exposed to the worst side of him, Sirius. To what he could do. You weren’t there when he dealt with Brackstone and his family, his son. Fuck, that little kid-” Lucius grows pale, shivers.

“I don’t blame you,” Sirius whispers.

Lucius shakes his head as if to clear it of those terrible memories. “And we don’t blame you, either.” *We.* Lucius has his own men- he speaks for most of the rich young men in the Sacred Twenty eight. Rodolphus had most of the army, the actual fighters, the criminals, the hardened men. Lucius had fewer people, but all rich, powerful in their own ways, even if not as competent and eager for battle as Rodolphus’. “You are the only one that had the nerve to stand up to him. A baby…” he mutters, shaking his head. “I would sit with Crabbe, Goyle and Nott at the Manor, watching Draco and their sons crawling around, and none of us would say it, but we were all thinking it…that it could have been our sons. Draco is six weeks older than Potter.” Lucius shivers again, runs his hand over his face for a second, shielding it from view, the mere thought Draco could have been targeted too horrible to comprehend for him. “He attacked a one-year-old. To make it worse, he lost to a one-year-old.”

“I have him. Harry.” Sirius says. “Is that going to be a problem for anyone? Is he in danger, Lucius?”

Lucius snorts. “No. Of course not. Well…you never know with Bella. Other than her, the craziest ones are in Azkaban, where they can’t be a threat to the boy. No one else would hurt a baby, would even think of it. Especially not a baby under your protection.”

Good. Sirius breathes a little easier. He knew most of the Death Eaters aren’t the sort of men to murder babies, and the ones that would do it, were too devoted to Voldemort, they refused to renounce him, so now they’re all in Azkaban.

“Greyback? The vampires? What became of them?”

“Greyback remains in his forests. Aurors are still weakened, terribly so. It is not the time to lose more men, not when they know without the dark lord, the werewolves won’t dare approach society again. Vampires have gone to ground. Some left the country. The Dementors will remain where they are fed, of course. The giants are too far away and too stupid to affect us.”

It seems so…unreal, how fast it all went away. They were winning, and then, in a blink-

But, of course, *Voldemort* was winning, no one else. Without him to lead his army, without the adoration and fear he inspired, everything shattered in his absence.

“You know he’s not really dead,” Sirius says, and a muscle jerks on Lucius’ face. Voldemort did say he left ‘clues’ with Lucius.

“I know.”

“Yet you aren’t searching for him.”

“He attacked a *baby*,” Lucius hisses. “And then he lost, and he left us all to our fates. I have Aurors watching my moves, and they will watch for a while longer. I have a son. I won’t be risking any of that, my freedom, going around looking for someone that attacked a baby. We can- we can get what we want without him. We still have a majority in the Wizengamont. We can control the Minister-”

“You always could,” Sirius says, quietly. “Why on Earth did you join him? You always had everything, Lucius.”

“I was young. I wanted glory, I- I believed in him.” A short pause, almost embarrassed. “And he believed in me. You know how it felt to have someone like him confiding in you, reassuring you.”

Yeah, Sirius knows.

“And if-when-he comes back? What then?”

Lucius breathes out. “We’ll see. Maybe it will take him decades. Maybe we’ll be dead by the time he crawls out of wherever he’s hiding. If not- well. He’s not one to forgive easily, but he can’t kill us all, can he? I am a Malfoy, even he must be aware of it, no matter how angry he gets. He always remembered it, before. He’ll have to ‘forgive’ me, if he comes back.”

Silence falls.

Drinking, Sirius slips back to his cell, to the cold, the hunger, the pain-

“Do you know where he is? You were the …closest to him. You and Bella.” Lucius’ voice startles him.

He blinks, focuses on the fireplace. It’s the middle of the summer, but Sirius often asks for the fireplaces to be lit, because he’s so incredibly cold.

“He’s in my dungeon.”

Lucius flinches. “Sirius,” he says, softly, but then he doesn’t follow it up with anything.

More silence, more pain, more *‘why? why did you do this? why did you do this to me?’*.

“I didn’t mean his body. I meant…him. Do you know where he fled?”

Sirius shakes his head. “I could find him. In a second. I could.”

Sirius only needs to ask the stars. They’ll tell him. Show him. Lead him to Voldemort.

“But you won’t?” Lucius sounds hopeful.

“I won’t.”

(-)

“Where is the rest?” Sirius asks, in his fathe- in his office.

He’s even sitting in the chair, though it feels so weird, especially with his grandfather sitting on the other side, where Sirius used to sit as a teenager and get berated about whatever he’d done wrong.

The ring is between them, lying inconspicuously on the desk.

He asked his grandfather to give him back his things, the ones the Aurors confiscated.

“Apologises,” his grandfather drawls. “I threw the rest of the trash away, but I shall buy you tobacco and cheap alcohol if you were so attached to-”

“Not that.”

“That’s all there was. And some hideous clothes, which I burned.”

Sirius struggles to keep his calm. There was Tom Riddle’s picture.

“Nothing else.” His grandfather glares at him, challenging Sirius to say it, to ask for the picture of the man that fucked up everything, to admit he still wants it, that if he got it, he’d keep it, probably stare at it for hours on end.

Sirius almost asks, even if he’d be mortified to do it. But why put himself through that? His grandfather most definitely burned it.

“I’m surprised you kept this,” Sirius says, nodding at the ring.

His grandfather keeps glaring. “You truly don’t know what it is, then?”

Again with this nonsense. “What do you think it is?” he asks, carefully.

“The Resurrection Stone.”

Sirius’ jaw falls open. “What?”

“What an idiot,” his grandfather sighs. “How could you not recognise it? Did you not feel the power of it, boy? You wore it on-”

“Do not call me ‘boy’,” Sirius orders.

His grandfather's eye twitches, but as always, he gets himself under control. "How could you not feel it, Sirius? Are you blind, also? Didn't you recognise the Deathly Hallows symbol?"

Sirius felt the magic, alright. Dark, alluring. He assumed it was Voldemort's soul trapped inside the ring that was responsible for it.

"I- the Gaunts used the symbol for their House, after-"

"I know. But when you see a stone, brimming with dark magic, and with that symbol on it, you don't even think it could be *that* Stone?'

I thought it was just a fairytale, he almost says. Sure, he heard of people wasting their lives trying to find the Deathly Hallows, but he thought they were crazy.

"It can't be," he whispers, and he takes the ring in his hand.

The moment he touches it, it's like the Horcrux greets him, a rush of *something* going up his arm. It never did that, *before*. It feels stronger, now.

"It is. I recognised it as soon as you showed it to me, and now I know for sure."

"How can you know for sure…" Sirius trails off when it registers.

If this is the famous stone, then it can resurrect the dead. And to be sure it does that, then his grandfather would have-

Sirius' breath catches in his throat.

They look at each other.

Father, he thinks. *I can see Father.*

His heart gallops in his chest, more alive than it's been in almost a year, his limbs feel heavy with excitement, joy, dread, all at once.

"It's *real*?" Sirius asks, and he sounds as childish as Harry. "It works?"

His grandfather's face softens. "Sirius…" he sighs. "It is real, and it does work, but you should not use it. It's not natural, it's not-"

"You saw Father? It really works?" Sirius cuts over him, and his fist holds on so tight to the ring that it hurts.

His grandfather looks away. "I called my wife."

Sirius blinks. He's still struggling to accept this is real, that he has the means to see his father- that he had the means to see his father for so long-

Fuck, if only I'd have known sooner! His father would have advised him, he'd have-

No. You'd have never used it. You'd have never faced him while you were fucking Voldemort.

He swallows, excitement tempered. *Can I face him?*

“It hurts them,” his grandfather keeps speaking. “The dead should rest, they want to rest, and it is a selfish, cruel torture to force them in our realm again. The stone shouldn’t be used.” His grandfather stands. “Let my son rest.”

“How do I use it?”

“Sirius-”

“How. Do. I. Use. It,” Sirius spits out every word. To think- to even entertain the notion he has the means to speak to his father again, and to have that chance taken from him? Impossible.

“You’ll know, if you remember the story.” With that, his grandfather leaves.

(-)

He’s still in the office, hours later, in the same spot, watching the ring.

He does remember the story, it was one of his favourites when he was a child. Of course, as a young boy, he always wanted the Elder Wand, but sometimes, in bed, he thought he’d use the Stone to bring his sister back, give her to his mother, so she can be happy again.

A book is open in front of him, but it isn’t the fairytale. It’s a genealogy book, heavy and thick.

There were always rumours the story was based on the Peverell brothers.

If the Stone is real, the Wand is real. The Cloak is real. So he traced the Peverell family tree, went through pages of it, through marriages and lineages, until he reached the last two descendants.

The Gaunts and the Potters.

Gods, James. Mate, if only you knew.

James wonderful cloak, that never failed them, that lasted seven years!

Mr Potter told them he used it for mischief in his years at Hogwarts, too, but Sirius and James didn’t believe him, because no invisibility cloak lasts that long. They indulged him, thought he took pleasure in saying that little white lie to James, to connect them.

But no, he was truthful. The cloak lasted, because it was The Cloak. The one that can hide the owner from Death’s eyes, no less.

Where would it be?

When Sirius immediately thinks to get it, because Harry *must* have it, he realises that there were people that would have went to Godric's Hallow, after that night, just as they went to Sirius' house.

That maybe Aurors took it.

And Dumbledore, who asked to take Sirius' things from the Aurors-

"He used to eye it all the time, when I wore it at school," Voldemort says. *"It wasn't a Horcrux yet, I waited until I finished Hogwarts to turn it, so I am not sure what his fascination with it was,"* Voldemort said, warning Sirius Dumbledore will immediately recognise the ring belonged to Voldemort, if he ever saw it on Sirius.

Shit, he knows. He knows about the Hallows- well, obviously, if his grandfather knows about them, a man like Dumbledore would, too.

How come Voldemort never considered it?

Muggle raised. Never read the fairytale.

Then again, Sirius read it, and he thought it was bullshit.

What were the chances that one of those mythical objects would fall into Voldemort's lap? And that he'd give it *away*?

Sirius imagines his face, if he learned about it. Oh, he'd be furious.

Not that Voldemort would want to bring anyone back from the dead, but he'd want the others. He'd want the Cloak, what with his fear of Death.

He'd want the Wand.

Sirius can't figure out where the wand would be. There are several possibilities, but Antioch, the one that must have made the wand, died without children. The other two brothers left heirs behind, all the way down to the Gaunt and Potter line.

Sirius can't focus properly; he cares not about powerful wands, and myths, and Horcruxes.

The ring distracts him. And not because it is Voldemort's.

But because he can see his father.

He does remember from the story that the woman the brother called did not want to be there.

His grandfather is right- this is unnatural magic, the dead should stay dead, they do not like being disturbed. On Samhain, when people do rituals to call upon their dead, they don't like it, either.

It's wrong.

Father wouldn't care, Sirius tells himself. *Father wanted me to come to him, when I am in trouble. Father wanted to help me when I needed him. He wouldn't mind, he-*

That was before, though. *Before you ran away from home, before you didn't even go to his funeral, before you fucked Voldemort, let him brand you like cattle. He'd want nothing to do with you now.*

Regulus' words ring through his head, from their fight at the Ministry. 'If Father was alive, he'd disown you himself'.

(-)

"Master, little Master Harry asks for you," Dobby says, startling Sirius.

"What, why? Is he alright?"

"Yes! It's bedtime- he wants to sleep."

Bedtime?

Sirius looks at the clock on the wall. He's been shut in there for no less than eight hours.

Time plays tricks on him, since Azkaban. Sometimes seconds seem like days, sometimes hours feel like the blink of an eye.

"I-"

Sirius looks down, to the ring, still clutched in his fist.

"I can't. I- I can't."

He's too…he's not well. He's agitated, he's in pain, he's in no condition to be around Harry.

Dobby leaves, and Sirius falls back into his thoughts.

And then Kreacher is there, with the potions. As always, he wants to stay there and make sure Sirius takes them, so they have a bit of an *argument*, and when the old fucker starts insisting and insulting Sirius, Sirius hits him, quite hard.

See, you really should't be around anyone right now.

He banishes Kreacher to the kitchen.

(-)

Tessuth comes next.

“I don’t want to sleep,” he snarls at her.

“These are morning potions, Master Altair,” Tessuth says. “Not sleepy ones.”

Sirius blinks at her, and yes, she’s carrying another tray of potions with her.

It’s morning.

How? When?

“Master Altair takes them. *Now*. Tessuth is not going anywhere. Tessuth can’t be ordered around. It would be for the best if Master Altair doesn’t try to hit Tessuth.”

Sirius is shaking, huddled on the couch in the office. He hadn’t been off his potions in three weeks. He didn’t realise how bad it would get without them. So he lets her give him the morning potions. He knows there are three different calming draughts in his morning regiment, on top of a strengthening elixir, and a nutrient vial.

“Mistress- ugh- Mistress Mother is worried about Master. What should Tessuth tell her?”

“I’ll be- I’ll be out in a moment. I’m fine.”

Sirius does feel better. The potions work fast. He stops shaking, and his mind clears a little.

Tessuth scoffs. “Master is the furthest thing from fine. Wizards know best, or so they claim,” she sneers, “so Tessuth won’t argue. But if Tessuth was to argue, she’d say that Master doesn’t need potions. Master suffers from a broken heart, Tessuth can smell it. Master needs his mate, not potions. If Master was Elvish, he’d need his mate to make him whole again, not silly potions. But Master is wizard, not Elven, though with how beautiful Master is, he could have been half Elven. The old elves were beautiful.” She laughs, shakes her head, ears flopping around. “Only the pointy ears remain to house-elves, but the High Elves were beautiful, once, before wizards slaughtered them all and enslaved their young, defenceless offsprings.”

She glares at him.

Sirius blinks at her. “Should you be talking like that?” He doesn’t think she should.

“No. Tessuth is being disobedient lately. Master- the Old Master. Orion- no, Sirius, Helix? Pollux? Phineas? Regulus?”

“Arcturus.”

“That one. Master Arcturus says Tessuth is being naughty lately.” She shrugs. “It’s his fault, his mistake that Tessuth is being bad. Since the *other* old Master died, Tessuth sometimes can’t hold her tongue as she should. Tessuth can disobey. But Tessuth loves her Blacks, always will. Lucky wizards, but don’t make Tessuth mad!”

She disappears.

Well, that’s…something. Really odd. He should talk with his grandfather. Wouldn’t do to have an uncontrollable elf running amok, at least not one as old as Tessuth, that remembers the wars, the High Elves.

He puts the ring away in one of the drawers, and he goes to check on Harry. He’s already dressed, laughing with Dobby and Snuffles, and as soon as he sees Sirius, he toddles his way, hugs Sirius leg, tightly.

During breakfast, his grandfather assures him everything is in order with Tessuth, that she’s just very, very old.

“All she does is sleep all day,” Sirius’ mother complains. “Last week I found her asleep in my *bed*. Really…”

“She worked for close to two thousend years, Walburga. You didn’t work a day in your life, no wonder you can’t understand why she’s so tired.”

“She is a bit creepy,” Regulus adds. “But she’s funny, too.”

With grandmother Irma out of the house, his mother relaxed a little, so Sirius convinced her to let Harry eat breakfast with them.

It really helps that Harry is well behaved, focused on his food, Dobby at his side, making sure everything is in order.

“Come,” Harry says, smiling, a while later, when they’re in the hallway, ready to go to the park. “Come!” he says, looking up at Sirius’ mother, just climbing up the stairs.

She freezes. “No, thank you,” she says, oddly formal, looking at Harry with a surprised expression. “I do not mix with filthy muggles.”

“Come,” Harry insists, and he tugs at her skirt.

“We could go someplace else,” Sirius suggests, uncertain. “Without muggles.”

Snuffles howls, running in circles around them, eager to get out.

“Well…” she hesitates.

“When was the last time you left the house?”

“Fine,” she gives in. “As long as there are no muggles!”

Sirius Apparates them all to a nice clearing, by a lake that he discovered with Marlene, long ago.

Not a soul in sight, muggle or otherwise.

Harry gets a little sick after the Apparition, he's not used to it.

His mother takes his hand, distracts him, walking him to the edge of the lake to show him a lily pad, and Harry gets well in no time.

It's a nice half an hour.

No one screams- well, Snuffles screams, but they are all so used to it, that no one is bothered, and they're not ugly screams, no painful words thrown around, so it's fine.

His mum is too civil with Harry, as she always is, but Harry likes her, picks up discarded leaves and weeds and brings them to where she sat on a transfigured blanket.

"No, no," Sirius says. "You don't bring weeds to ladies. Here-" he waves his hand over the weeds, turns them into beautiful flowers.

It makes Harry laugh, delighted.

It makes his mother smile.

Then, of course, she says: "You're good with children. You should have your own," and Sirius decides they better return home.

(-)

He takes all his potions that night, all but the ones that would send him to sleep.

But he's stable as he reads a story for Harry, who falls asleep within seconds.

He's still stable, when he returns to the office.

When he takes the ring out, though…

Once again, hours pass, as he paces around the office, lost in thought, anxious, scared.

In the end, the *yearning* wins.

The sun is starting to rise when Sirius breaths in, deeply, closes his eyes, and turns the ring, three times, thinking of his father.

He feels him, as soon as completes the third turn,

The magic in the room changes; the house, a constant presence now in Sirius' consciousness, alerts Sirius that something- someone, has breached the wards.

Sirius opens his eyes.

Orion Black looks as he always did. For some reason, Sirius expected a ghost. But it's not a ghost.

It's his father, in the flesh.

What terrible magic.

What wonderful magic.

His father's gaze is fixed on him, a tangible weigh, as it always was when his father looked his way. His eyes are sharp, the same grey as Sirius', the same shape, framed by black lashes.

Sirius worried that he would forget his father, that the memories of him were not accurate, that perhaps he was misremembering some details-

He shouldn't have worried. His father is exactly how he remembers him.

With two quick steps, Sirius closes the distance between them and hugs him.

He's cold. His father was always a cold man, but not *literally*. An eery chill surrounds him, different from the one induced by Dementors.

Once, Sirius wouldn't have known what it was. But he's spent more than a year practicing dark magic every day. He knows how it feels.

Dark Magic brought his father to him, and it lingers all around him.

Sirius buries his head in his father's neck, as he did when he was small, and his father would have to lift him up for him to reach.

And when strong, sure arms close around his back, it feels exactly *right*, it feels safe.

True safety. He thought that he felt safe with Voldemort, but he hadn't. Now that he feels the real thing again, he knows that he was never safe anywhere else, with anyone else.

"Dad," Sirius whispers, tasting salt on his lips, from his own tears.

His father hugs him tighter, and that only makes Sirius cry harder.

How am I supposed to ever let him go again? I can't!

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so sorry!"

"Sirius."

Gods, his voice.

Sirius clings to him, because if he doesn't, he'll fall. His knees are weak, there's no way they would support him.

"I'm sorry, Father," he repeats.

"Didn't I teach you Blacks don't apologise?"

Somehow, even if Sirius holds him so tightly, he draws back, enough that they can see each other.

Gods, how can I be taller? "Do you know? About- everything?" Sirius whispers.

"I always do."

That's true; his father always knew everything, somehow. Sirius couldn't hide a thing from him. And now, he has the knowledge of the dead, on top of that.

"Are you angry?"

His father's hand moves to Sirius' shoulder. "Not with you," he says.

How can he not be angry? "I left," Sirius confesses. Perhaps his Father doesn't know, after all?

"You are right where you are supposed to be. Home. You took a …detour, but you are home now." He grips Sirius' shoulder. "It's who you are; I always warned you not to trust outsiders, but you had to see it for yourself. You always wanted to test things yourself."

"I'm sorry."

"Father and Walburga failed you terribly." And now those eyes turn hard-*harder*- but the judgement is not aimed at Sirius. "You were young, lost, and Dumbledore knew how to take all your rage and turn you into a soldier."

Dumbledore- Sirius forgot about that for a second, forgot he joined Dumbledore, too, so focused on his shame about Voldemort.

It wasn't like that. Dumbledore didn't manipulate Sirius into joining the Order, he didn't take advantage of Sirius, he didn't-

No reason to think of it; he'd never say that to his father.

"And he was the one to send you to Riddle."

Not 'it', not 'the mudblood', not 'Voldemort'.

Riddle. How…common it sounds, how much it takes away from Voldemort's power.

"To save my life," Sirius says, against himself.

“If Dumbledore wanted to save your life, he’d have sent you home. Though, apparently, that wouldn’t have saved you either. Father stood aside and let Riddle get his claws into Regulus, after all.”

Grandfather wasn’t the same once you fell sick, Sirius almost says. *It destroyed him to lose you.*

“I should have stopped it,” Sirius says. “He’s my brother, and it was my duty to-”

“You saved him. You withstood Riddle. Regulus wouldn’t have. Regulus would have died.”

A shiver goes down Sirius’ spine. He never really considered it- yes, he protected Regulus, he offered to take his place, he told Voldemort he will do whatever it takes if only Regulus is left alone, but the certainty in his father’s tone, when he says Regulus would have died if Sirius wouldn’t have been there to shield him from Voldemort, from the war…it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“It wasn’t your duty. It shouldn’t have been, not as young. Yet Father, Cygnus, Alphard, Walburga- useless.”

“They were-”

“Oh, I’m sure they found excuses, but there is no excuse. There’s a reason Father didn’t use the stone to call me. He wouldn’t dare look me in the eyes after he failed you.”

“He saved me from Azkaban,” Sirius defends him.

“You shouldn’t have been there to begin with. He shouldn’t have let you get in that position. My son...in Azkaban. And Father wasting months, while you *suffered* there.”

It’s his father that hugs Sirius now, holds him close to him.

If he were alive, Sirius wouldn’t have spent a second in Azkaban. Because his father truly kept him safe, always.

“It’s my fault,” Sirius whispers into his shoulder. “Those were my choices.”

“You don’t realise how young you were, but you will grow; you’ll look back one day and understand that a twenty-year-old doesn’t have many defences against men decades older. Not just any men, at that, but two of the most manipulative bastards in the world. You had Dumbledore and Riddle whispering venom in your ear. It was Father’s job to protect you from them. But he stood aside, allowed Walburga to chip away at you until you left, straight into the waiting arms of our enemies. He did nothing to get you back. You’re standing here right now, in *your* home, because of Riddle, of all people. Father has no excuse.”

Is Voldemort the reason why Sirius is home?

Would I not have returned, if it weren't for him?

“I don’t- I don’t blame them. I love them,” Sirius says. He always loved his family, even when he hated them.

He’d have always loved them, even if he never returned. They are a part of him, always will be, no matter what, no matter if they speak or not, if they fight, or scream or ignore each other.

“Good.” His father draws back again, cups his face. “You are Head of the family. It is your duty to love them, even when they fail you; to protect them, even when they don’t return the favour. *You* took Bellatrix out of Azkaban. They just gave up on her. Her own father...”

Sirius forgot how terrifying his Father’s anger truly was. How harsh and cold his gaze was, how hard to hold.

The others never understood why Sirius didn’t fear Voldemort, why he met his eyes, held his gaze with no hesitation.

They didn’t know that Voldemort’s eyes, even bloodstained, strange, otherworldly, they were warm.

Sirius never feared fire; he knew ice burns deeper, in its own way. He learned that in his home, in his childhood.

“They tried to help her-”

“You don’t try; you just do it.” His father always said that. When Sirius would complain, would ask why he must be perfect, why he must master everything on his first attempt, why he isn’t allowed any mistake, when he begged his parents to understand he’s trying his hardest, his father would watch him sternly. *There’s no trying, Sirius. Trying means one can fail, and there will be moments in your life when you cannot afford to misstep, when a single mistake can cost you everything, can cost our family everything.* His fingers tighten on Sirius’ jaw. “And you did.”

Sirius nods. He, too, can’t understand how Cygnus resigned himself, accepted Bella’s fate.

It’s incomprehensible to him.

“You will marry. Without delay. Do not allow Father or Walburga to pick your bride; they are clueless about your needs. Stay away from what you think you want, too. Do not pick someone like Bellatrix. You don’t need that headache. Women like her will fight you at every turn. Pick the opposite of what you think you want; that should serve you well.”

Sirius says nothing.

His father smiles, and it softens his eyes, even if only slightly. “When you will hold your child in your arms, all your…*anxieties* will melt away. Riddle, Potter, Azkaban- they will mean nothing when you look down upon your own flesh and blood, the future of your family, your legacy. I promise you that. When you will have a child, there will be no doubts to plague you. You will know then, what to do. All that will matter will be to keep them safe.”

“I-yes. Harry already-”

“Potter is not your son,” he says, not unkindly. Simply factual. “You will see the difference. This *sick* hold Riddle has over you can overpower many things, but it shall never overpower the love you will have for your sons or daughters- nothing overpowers that. Regulus must marry, too. Make sure of it.”

“Alright.”

Sirius would do pretty much anything, because his father isn’t angry with him. With all his fuck ups, with the horrible betrayals Sirius committed against him, his father doesn’t hate him, doesn’t blame him.

“You did what was right, despite your…feelings for Riddle,” his father says. “You did right by that boy you promised to protect. You didn’t crumble, though it would have been easy to crumble, to act like Father, to hide behind excuses. You didn’t. You stood by what you knew was right. And now Riddle is dead, and you are not.”

“He’s not really dead-”

“I know.” His father lets go of him, and Sirius laments the loss, immediately wants to burrow into him.

“He will come back, eventually,” Sirius whispers, horrified, looking at his father, wanting to be saved.

Voldemort will return, and if Sirius isn’t the one to bring him back, there will be *hell* to pay. If Voldemort was willing to listen to Sirius, before, to offer grace to the Twenty-Eight, offer them the country, he won’t if he’s left to find a way to return on his own.

Voldemort believes it was Sirius that wronged him, that betrayed him.

Does it hurt him, the way his betrayal hurts me?

“I expect that he will, yes. But you will be a child no longer when it happens. He will have a harder time manipulating you when you’re a proper man, when you have your own children to keep safe.”

Sirius bites his lip. “He forced many fathers into doing his bidding,” he says, carefully. “He held their children against them.”

“Weak men. You are not weak.”

Sirius feels weak. “I don’t- I can’t fight him. I *can’t*. I can’t destroy him, Father, I wish I could.”

Sirius isn’t sure if his father understands he doesn’t just mean he’s not powerful enough to bring down a man like Voldemort, but that his heart won’t let him.

“I am not asking you to do that. Fighting against men like him is an exercise in futility. The only man than can destroy Riddle, is Riddle himself, as he proved. His own hubris, his lack of values, his fear...” His father sneers, pure contempt all over his features. “He’s his own downfall. It is what I told Abraxas, long ago. The wisest course of action is to wait Riddle out. He always sabotages himself, ever since he was a child. I’ve watched him make the worst possible choices when we were both mere boys. He already lost, Sirius. He lost the moment he ripped his soul apart, desecrated his own magic in a pathetic attempt to keep his life. Yet what worth does life have, without a purpose? He tainted his magic, he weakened himself, no one had to do it for him. You only have to wait, to work around him, not against him. You are a Black, you have family, you have a purpose, and you have other great families that will always respect you more than they respect him. He is feared, but respected? He will never enjoy that. He’s an outsider that tramples over our laws and traditions- he wrongly assumed that what we purebloods value most is power. It isn’t. We value family. Grow up, grow strong, preserve your connections with your peers. And when he returns, you will have enough resources to wait him out, to stand your ground, while he’ll find new ways to fail. You only have to let him do it. Even if he outlives you, you shall raise new Blacks, and Malfoys will raise new Malfoys, and so forth. Eventually, he will die for good, but our families never will. And that is how we win. We win, because we are not individuals. We are our names, our blood, and all our ancestors live on in us. Blacks endure even when faced with the most dangerous challenges. Wizards like him are rare, aberrations that burn bright, but fade fast. They leave legends behind them, a mark in history books, tales to frighten children centuries after they have ceased to exist. There had been a handful of men like him before, through history, but where are they now? Dead. Gone. No legacy. Blacks are still here. And if you do your duty, Blacks will carry on. Riddle has no children; Dumbledore has no children. Selfish men, that were gifted with extraordinary power and intellect, yet they horde it for themselves, they do not pass it on to a child.”

It’s heartbreaking to think Voldemort will only live on in history books. It’s heartbreaking that no one will remember Tom Riddle.

“We should take care of each other,” Sirius says, in a whisper. But he *must* say it. “You taught me that. Not just Blacks, but we should guard our world from the muggles, we should be the shields that protect magic, and our fellow wizards. If we’d have done that, if our community would have protected a little boy, then...perhaps there wouldn’t have been a Voldemort.”

His father considers him carefully. He reaches for Sirius again, his grip strong, reassuring. “He filled your head with lies,” his father says, slowly. “He was given plenty of chances. He was the brightest student Hogwarts has ever seen. By the time I came to school, he proved himself intelligent, capable and powerful. He was given opportunities even some purebloods aren’t given. Slughorn found him jobs that were never offered to men as young as Riddle; there were people in the Ministry that were awed with the results of his N.E.W.Ts, with tales of his genius. Masters of Magic all over Europe offered him apprenticeships, when Slughorn sent them letters. Riddle rejected them all and went to work at a shop. Because Tom Riddle wanted to do things his own way, because he didn’t want to be indebted to anyone, because he didn’t want to fit in our world, to follow our rules. He didn’t want to work to become our equal. He wanted to be above us. He was filled with rage, and he never let it go. Do not pity him. He’s not worth your pity. He doesn’t *deserve* it. I know your heart, I know how big it is, I know that you are loyal. But it’s wasted on him. He doesn’t understand loyalty, sacrifice, he

doesn't understand anything, because he doesn't *want* to. Over and over again, he chose this life, Sirius. Yes, children were mean to him when he got to Hogwarts, but he could have made friends by the time he was done. Boys like Abraxas and Mulciber were impressed with him, eventually. He could have made friends there. But he didn't want friends. All he wants is to burn everything in his path. He was so blinded by hate that he saw all those opportunities offered to him as threats. Slughorn's help was considered pity, so he rejected him. Offers from the Ministry were seen as chains to hold him down. You can't help someone that doesn't want help. You saw it yourself. Father offered him a seat in the Wizengamot, but he rejected it. *I* offered him the same thing, when he came back, hell bent on starting a war. He didn't want his seat, he didn't want to rule with us. Like I said, he wants no equals."

How could he not have told me Father offered him a seat in the Wizengamot?

His father's eyes narrow with anger.

"You were a pet to him, Sirius, nothing more. He doesn't understand what a partner means."

Sirius steps into him again, buries his face in his neck.

"He's not worth your tears, either," his father says, harshly, yet he holds Sirius, either way, lets him cry.

"Are you-" Sirius asks, voices muffled. "Are you alright, Father? Wherever you are, is it painful?"

He doesn't want to talk about Voldemort anymore. Or about himself.

"Death isn't painful. Don't worry about me. It's not your duty."

"It's not all about duty! I love you, of course I worry about you. I miss you. Mother misses you. We all miss you."

"It will pass. You'll see."

No, it won't pass. Impossible.

"You only need time to heal. And you will, now that you have the chance to do it in peace, that there isn't a war raging around you. Look at me."

Sirius obeys, drawing his head back.

"Let go of your guilt. You didn't wrong me, you didn't disappoint me. I'm not upset that you didn't come to the funeral."

"I couldn't-"

"I know. I'm not upset. Let it go, Sirius. You are exactly the man I thought you were. I'm proud of you, and I believe in you, as I always did. Ever since you were born, you only brought me joy, son." He smiles. "Even when you were a little terror."

“I know I made you worry in those last years, that I wasn’t behaving as you-”

“All fathers worry. It’s not the children’s fault, it’s natural. You and Regulus were the best parts of my life, never doubt it. I wish we’d have had more time, but there is no sense in mourning something that can’t be undone. Let me go, Sirius.”

“Never-”

“I will always be with you,” his father says, cupping both sides of his face. “I will be in your blood, in your heart, but I do not wish to be a source of pain. If anything, that saddens me the most. That I caused you pain.”

“No, it’s not you, it’s just that I lost you. It’s not your fault.”

“It isn’t yours, either. Sirius…” His father rests his forehead against Sirius’, as they did when Sirius was a child. “Nothing hurt me more than when you almost lost your life, in an attempt to save mine. Your life will always be more valuable than mine, child. Infinitely more valuable.”

“No-”

“Yes. Don’t argue with me, you know better than that. If I say it, then it’s true. Live your life, Sirius. Let old, dead men behind you. You can honour me by living your life, enjoying it as much as a man in your position can. It’s not easy being Head of House. People only see the privilege, the power that comes with it, but no one sees the sacrifices. Make the most of it, find joy wherever you can, as you do your duty to our family. Promise me.”

Sirius closes his eyes. “I promise,” he says, steeling himself. “I promise,” he repeats, opening his eyes.

“Good. Now, can you do something else for me?”

“Anything, Father.”

“This business with Walburga and drinking- put an end to it.”

“I’ll try-”

“You do not try. You do.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not your fault, either. You must know it, no matter what she says. It is my fault, and it shames me that you have to deal with it in my stead.”

“She’s my mum. I want to help her. I have to.”

“Be smarter than I was. Marry someone that has nothing in common with her. Marry someone boring, uninteresting. You’ve had enough …passion to last you a lifetime, anyway.

Your home should be peaceful, not interesting, otherwise your children will suffer because of it."

"You loved her, didn't you?" Sirius asks. "You always loved her."

"Since I can remember. But, as you experienced yourself, us Blacks love too intensely. It doesn't make for peaceful unions."

"Do you regret it?"

His father *laughs*, draws back. "No. I'd do it all over again."

Sirius knows he would do it all over again, too. He knows it in his heart.

Having Voldemort, sharing what they shared- Sirius would take the pain, would take Azkaban, would pay the price, again and again, if only so he could keep those memories. He doesn't regret it, no matter how terrible it ended, how much it hurts.

His father is right. The way a Black loves is dangerous and painful. It's too much.

"You can call me whenever you want," his father says. "But you don't need me, Sirius. You don't need anyone. You can stand on your own."

He'll have to stand on his own, whether he wants to or not. He doesn't have anyone left that he can lean on.

"Is it bad for you, if I call you? Does it hurt-"

"I told you not to worry about me. If you want me, I will come. But it isn't good for you. You should destroy this ring, destroy the power it holds, and the ghost that inhabits it."

Sirius says nothing.

"I know you won't," his father sighs. "I know you won't move his body out of my house, either."

"I'm sor-"

"Blacks do not apologise. And it's your house, now, I suppose. You do with it as you please. Let him stay there, in the dungeon. Underneath you, as it should be."

And you were saying Voldemort was bad, for wanting to stand above all others.

Sirius knows better than to voice that thought.

"Do tell Walburga you moved him, though. It bothers her."

He forgot his mother knows, that she saw Sirius bringing Voldemort home.

"You should wear your ring, our ring. You'll find that it fits you now, perfectly. It won't be too big for you anymore."

“And if it is?”

“Then you grow into it.” His father smiles. “I was a man with children of my own when I got it from Grandfather. Those were some big shoes to step into. Grandfather was was a tough act to follow. It felt big for me, too, in the beginning. But I got used to it. You’re ready. You weren’t, years ago, but you are ready now.”

Ready or not…he has no choice, no one to hide behind, no excuses.

“I am proud of you, Sirius. I love you. I know I didn’t say it enough, but I do love you.”

“I know. I aways knew.”

They hug again, in silence. His father is patient, as he always was, waits for Sirius to gather his courage.

Eventually, he does. He must. Still clinging to his father, Sirius turns the stone in his palm. Once, twice-

“Goodbye, Father.”

Thrice.

He disappears from Sirius’ arms.

Sirius thought it would feel like losing him, all over again. That it would be devastating, how it was when he was sixteen.

It isn’t. It hurts, but-

It’s not devastating. In fact, relief mixes with the pain. Something settles in his chest.

Sirius puts the ring away, in the top drawer of the office.

By the time he composed himself, dried his tears, his family is waiting patiently for him in the kitchen, for breakfast.

Sirius sits, and Kreacher starts serving them.

“I will marry,” Sirius says, and his mother looks surprised, but smiles.

Regulus’s left eyebrow rises high on his forehead.

His grandfather doesn’t react, doesn’t look at Sirius. He knows about the stone. He must imagine why Sirius finally accepts to marry, *who* would have been the only soul to convince him.

“How about Nastea-”

“No,” Sirius cuts over her. “Lucius will pick someone for me.”

Lucius is the best match maker in their world, responsible for many marriages. He's so talented at it, that even his mother doesn't protest.

"As long as you marry," she mutters. "At least Malfoy has good taste."

Lucius would never pick someone Sirius would have picked. But Lucius is wiser than Sirius, so there's that.

(-)

"I trust you," Sirius says, not even looking at the photograph Lucius places on the table, saying he found the perfect wife.

He moved *fast*. It's only been two weeks since he began searching. Outside the country. Lucius said they need more allies in Europe.

"You know her already. You've met her when I was trying to find Regulus a wife. Astrid Kristiansen."

Sirius only vaguely recalls it. "Wasn't she a child?" He remembers his mum instructing Regulus not to give the girl alcohol.

"That was two years ago. She's eighteen now, almost nineteen."

Sirius shrugs. "Fine- wait. Didn't we kill a Kristiansen in Norway, when…"

When they went with Voldemort, and that disastrous meeting with dark wizards. When Sirius lost his shit that they insulted Voldemort.

Before the meeting, Lucius dutifully told Voldemort all about the men, their families.

Sirius remembers Kristiansen, because it is an important name in Europe, amongst blood purists.

Lucius waves it off. "Different branch of the family. Besides, it's not like Thor would know it was us. Thor is the-"

"I know. He and Father attended the Institute together."

"I've spent the last five days in Norway, in their house. Of course, I couldn't talk to Astrid on my own, it's not proper, but Narcissa did, and I saw the girl at dinner a handful of times. She's perfect for you, trust me. Just what you need. And Thor is a good ally to have. His wife, Astrid's mother, is Princess-"

"I know," Sirius cuts over him. It's as if Lucius thinks him an idiot.

Lucius sighs. “Such enthusiasm,” he mocks, but then he turns serious. “Give her a chance. Marriage takes effort, it takes compromise, but you can have something beautiful, if only you want it. I made sure to bring you a girl that will compromise. The rest is up to you.”

Sirius snorts.

“You think Narcissa and I fell in love with each other as soon as we learned we were to marry?”

“No. She cried when they told her,” Sirius offers, staring ahead at the wall. He just took his potions, so he’s a little…floaty. Detached. “I’ve never seen her cry before that day.”

Of course, that wasn’t exactly because of Lucius, but because she also just learned Andromeda left them, and Narcissa had to honour the contract with Abraxas in her stead.

“We wanted to make it work, and we did. I wanted to love her, and I love her. We’re happy, because we chose to be happy. I hope you’ll chose it, too.”

“Did you love someone before Narcissa?” Sirius asks.

He remembers Lucius was very popular at Hogwarts, and beyond. Girls ran after him, they plotted how to trap him into marriage. While he was discrete, even Lucius was once a teenager, and he was seen with a number of girls before he was officially engaged to Andromeda.

Lucius stands. He looks at Sirius with that ever present pity. “No. I’m not a masochist. I knew I will eventually marry whoever I was told to marry, so I guarded my heart for it.”

Lucius was always a very practical man.

(-)

The Black ring still feels heavy, but Sirius puts it on, in his vault, surrounded by his obscene wealth.

Poor little rich boy, someone once mocked him, when he was drinking alone, in some pub, just out of Hogwarts, feeling lost, not knowing what to do, not belonging anywhere, not even with James, who was set to marry in just a couple of weeks.

Sirius often wondered if people thought that rich men have no feelings, that they only care about their gold, that they fuck their gold, hug it to sleep at night. That it automatically makes them happy, at all times, covers all their needs.

Sirius was happiest when he was a very small child, and he didn’t even know what gold was. He was happy when his parents were happy, when they loved him.

Sirius was happiest in Voldemort's small, simple cabin.

He was happy when James laughed, when Remus hugged him, when Peter looked at him with trust. There was no gold involved.

The ring doesn't feel too big anymore. Then again, Sirius is under various different potions. He hardly feels anything these days.

Even when, days later, his grandfather visits, and offers him another ring, Sirius doesn't cry, doesn't even flinch.

He immediately recognises it, a big, square diamond, surrounded by smaller sapphires, still shining brightly, even if centuries old.

"I thought you buried her with it," he says.

His grandmother loved her ring. Everyone else loved her ring, too. Not a day went by without someone complimenting it.

"She wanted you to have it," his grandfather puts it on the desk. "She said it is too beautiful to bury. She gave it to Orion, in the last hour of her life, said to keep it for your future wife." He pats Sirius on the shoulder. "Astrid is lovely. I hope she will bring you the comfort Melania brought me."

His grandfather was the one to go back and forth, between Norway and England, Wilkes at his side, as they negotiated the contract with Thor. Days in a row, but now it's ready, the final version sitting on Sirius' desk. He's yet to look at it. He doesn't think he ever will. It's very thick. He trusts his grandfather left nothing to chance, that he negotiated until he was satisfied House Black gets what it wants.

(-)

They move to Black Manor, where the wedding will be held, to receive people.

They come in abraxan drawn carriages, on flying carpets, or International Portkeys.

Guests from all over Europe arrive, as the days pass, a flurry of activity. Because the mother of Sirius' bride is a Princess, the third daughter of the old Russian Emperor, because Sirius is a Black, and the Kristiansen family is also a noble, old House in Norway, so many foreigners attend, that Malfoy, Parkinson and Avery put up their own Manors at their disposal, to house all the guests.

Sirius remembers times from his childhood when the Black Manor was filled with foreigners- for birthday parties, for weddings, for Yule or Beltane or Samhain. He used to love it, but now he hates it, and he does his utmost best to avoid everyone, spends his days far away from

cohorts of women in the gardens, having tea, choosing instead to hide in the forests surrounding the Manor, with Harry and Snuffles.

He lets Regulus entertain the guests on his behalf, as the Black Heir, and, of course, both his grandfathers are there to represent him. His mother is as reclusive as he is, so it falls to grandmother Irma to be the perfect Black woman host, though everyone knows she's an awfully rude woman, so Narcissa runs between her own Manor and his own, being her amazing, sociable self, organising everything, ordering the house elves like her own personal army, on whom to serve first, whom to pay special attention to.

Many foreigners came with their own house elves, so Sirius understands there's drama going on in the kitchens as well, and Tessuth stabs one of the others on the third day, accusing her small enemy of being a goblin in disguise.

"Everyone is looking for you," Regulus complains, finding Sirius, their mother, and Harry in one of the forests furthest from the house. "For both of you!"

Their mother ignores him, very involved in telling Harry a story, showing him the images from the book. The boy loves them, tracing the moving trolls and brave wizards, with his tiny fingers, mouth slightly open.

Sirius busies himself with throwing a ball further and further away, charming it with speed, but so far Snuffles still manages to catch it every time.

"Really, Sirius! Forget the rest of the guests, but wouldn't it be wise to at least exchange a few words with your bride? Before the wedding?"

"We have a lifetime to talk," Sirius says, with an internal shudder. A *life*. His entire life. A walking prison, at his side, in his home. Forever.

Still better than Azkaban, though.

"And since I'm not allowed to drink," his mother glares at Sirius before returning to the picture book, "I'm afraid I will end up slapping some of those old hags. Or Mother. Best we stay away."

Sirius made a pact with her. She stops drinking, and he gets married. So they can both be miserable together.

"It's not a good look!" Regulus insists. "We're the hosts, and Sirius is missing, you are missing, Bella is missing, and so is Cygnus and Druella! People are gossiping about it!"

Bella is locked away in Cygnus' home, needing both of her parents there to watch over her.

"Let them gossip," their mother says, as Sirius shrugs. "They always gossip, no matter what. We are Blacks, we do not concern ourselves with anyone's gossip."

"What next?" Harry pulls her sleeve. "Tell me! Tell me!"

So she dismisses Regulus and turns the book.

(-)

On the wedding day, they give more potions to Sirius than usual.

“What, does Grandfather think I’m gonna do a runner?”

“Kreacher isn’t sure what Master Arcturus be thinking, but Kreacher suspects he worries Master Sirius might turn violent, rather than escape.”

Regulus and Lucius are there, hovering around Sirius, obsessing about his robes.

“Remember, the Russian Prince just arrived. He’ll only stay for the ceremony. Bow to him when you-”

“Bow?” Sirius snaps at Regulus. “*Me*?”

“Fine, just- do a respectful nod, alright? You can’t miss him, he has an escort of his royal guards, he’ll be seated on the front row. Sirius, he’s the Heir to the crown, and you know how prickly Russians get. Don’t ignore him! It’s a great honour he came all the way here to see his niece getting married. Luckily, he’ll leave right after, due to security concerns, so we won’t have to put up with him for long.”

Lucius sighs. “The Emperor himself would have come, but he cited worries about our recent ‘petty war’ and ‘criminals on the lose’, so he abstained, sent his Heir to represent him.”

They bicker over Sirius head, over all sort of nonsense. The potions are kicking in, so Sirius is unconcerned with anything.

He still looks half dead, when he glances in the mirror, after Lucius and Regulus deem him ready.

He put on some weight, his cheeks aren’t as sunken in, and the circles under his eyes aren’t as dark, but he still resembles a wraith of sorts.

He’s surprised to see his hair. He cuts it every month, but he’s still not accustomed to seeing it short.

The damage his body sustained is well hidden by the robes. It’s a version of the ceremonial robes of their House, the type his father sometimes wore, especially when he went on diplomatic meetings abroad.

This one is brand new, tailored specifically for Sirius. Multilayered, pressed to perfection, every thread of their coat of arms sewed by hand, from charmed silver, catching the sunlight that comes through the opened windows.

On the back, hundred of diamonds reproduce the Milky Way galaxy, as accurate as it would ever be on a robe.

The purple sash draped over his shoulder and across his body isn't new, it's the same one one of his ancestors received, a thousand years before, when the Order of Mages was created, with a Black as one of founding members.

The medals on his chest aren't new either. Sirius touches them, curious, because these were always kept away out of children's reach, made fragile with the passing of centuries, and he seldomly saw them on his father, only on special occasions when he wore them at highly official functions. Some are awards from the Elven wars, the Goblin wars, or the Great Magical Schism during the eight century.

Their family used to have more, but his great grandfather Sirius was buried with some of them.

Sirius' the First wand is also on display, held in place securely by silver chains, on the right side of the robe. It's the wand that is portrayed on their coat of arms, after all; it belonged to the man that *made* the coat of arms, their motto, and established House Black.

The robe is *so* heavy, that already Sirius' shoulders ache. He wonders if he will ever return to his former physique.

The thought comes to him that as he is just a shadow of his former self, his House is also a shadow of its former self, diminished. It would have depressed him if he wasn't already depressed and also under the powerful influence of several potions.

"To stabilise him," Hartwood said, when his mother asked what those potions in particular would do for him, months before. *"Prolonged exposure to dementors can erase one's natural barriers, those that are usually there to prevent us from acting on our worst impulses."* He gave Sirius a worried look. *"And he never had many barriers to begin with."*

(-)

As he walks down the aisle, Sirius is very grateful for the potions. There are so many people, and they're all staring at him, some with curiosity, some with fear, some with suspicion.

One step in front of the other, he thinks, holding his head high, ignoring them, Regulus following closely behind him.

He completely forgot his brother's warnings about the Prince, until he sees him. It's not the many guards around him, arranged in formation, wands in hand, that attract Sirius' attention, but the man himself, in a entirely golden robe, shining like the sun. Impossible to miss.

He'd grown fat. Sirius once visited the Imperial Palace when he was a child. The Prince was a young man, back then, handsome and willowy, with eyes as grey as Sirius'. Narcissa,

twelve at the time, begged Cygnus to marry her to the handsome Prince.

"He's already married. Sadly, you and your sisters were born too late to make a match."

"Well, can't we get rid of his wife, so he'd have to marry again?" Narcissa pouted.

His father laughed, Cygnus smirked. *"She's a Black, alright, despite her Rosier colouring,"* one of them said, and chided Narcissa, told her one doesn't say such things in public.

Sirius meets his eyes, and keeps walking. *Bowing,* really. His brother has gone mad. Sirius' father didn't bow to the Emperor, either. They shook hands, like equals, they dined together as equals.

The Russians holding on to their titles means nothing; most of magical Europe discarded titles, but if they hadn't, Sirius and many other members of old families would be royalty, too.

Even most muggles are giving up on it, Sirius hears. Not in Britain, but in general. He knows the muggle Russian Tzar gave up on- *oh, wait, no, he didn't give up, he was murdered.*

Come to think of it, most muggle royals were forced to give up titles, messy, bloody revolutions, they didn't willingly step down.

He thinks of that, as he takes his place at the dais, because even muggle history and their petty squabbles are preferable than thinking of the impeding ceremony.

Fudge is officiating the wedding, apparently, and he looks very proud about it.

What a lickspittle. But, indeed, it wouldn't do for a regular minister lackey to officiate a Black wedding.

When he lets his eyes wander over the crowd, this time facing them all, it's really a wonder no one has gone blind. So many gemstones shining, so many sophisticated robes, gleaming with colour.

And then everyone stands once more, and silence falls over the garden, as the bride makes her way to Sirius, holding onto her father's elbow.

She is beautiful, Sirius notices, in a detached sort of way.

Her robe is dark silver, with lighter accents here and there, high collared, and so long, some of its layers trail behind her.

A tiara sits proudly atop her head, fixed in an intricate hairstyle.

Oh, yes, I've seen her before, he only just now remembers. It's the tiara that triggers the memory, him commenting about it to his mother at that party held to marry of Regulus.

At least she looks like a woman now, not a teenage girl.

And she doesn't appear to be crying; at least there's that. Sirius saw many weepy brides in his childhood, though he saw some happy ones as well.

Astrid doesn't look happy.

But then, northerns aren't known for smiling too much, or for crying. She'll fit well in Sirius' family.

He has a flash of memory of Bella's wedding, and immediately, it puts his own very beautiful bride to shame. She is beautiful, but no one is more beautiful than Bella.

She wore no tiara, no robe, scandalising people with her dress, with her bare arms. Her hair was down, curls cascading down to her arse, and she smiled widely, her red painted, full lips revealing her perfect teeth. Rodolphus smiled too, just as happy. It scared people, because no one else saw him smiling before.

At their wedding, Narcissa and Lucius made for very beautiful blank statues. Not a smile in sight.

Sirius remembers the photographer encouraging them to 'smile', for the official picture that would be sent to the Daily Prophet, and neither did, glaring haughtily at the camera, making the photograph sweat under the combined death glare of a Black and a Malfoy.

On Grimmauld's walls, there are many portraits of his mother and father, glaring quite similarly at the unfortunate person that had to paint them; but in one of their scant photo albums, there's a wedding picture, the proof of his mother's lies; whenever she yelled at everyone that she didn't want to get married, Sirius would run to the attic, take out the album, and look at the photograph, where his mother was laughing, looking up to his father, who smiled down at her with an expression more gentle than Sirius ever witnessed for himself, in their daily lives.

What am I doing? A clear thought pierces through the potion induced calm.

For an awful second, as he watches his bride advancing towards him, Sirius is hit by a wave of pity, of a magnitude he had never felt for anyone in his life.

The girl must be scared enough, what with being shipped off to a foreign country, to marry a stranger from a family with an insane reputation, a man that spent more than half a year locked up for heinous crimes.

But that's not by far the worst part.

Sirius looks at her and he realises this poor girl will have to put up with him, with all the ghosts that refuse to leave him.

For a second, he's ready to stop the wedding, hit with this realisation.

He will make a horrible husband.

But, because he is an awful man, he quickly dismisses the idea. He won't do more harm to his family than he already did.

They were there for him when he needed them the most, and Sirius will do his duty.

Before he knows it, Thor is right in front of him, handing Astrid's gloved hand to Sirius.

Sirius hates the man, on principle. He is now to be Sirius' father in law, and how dare anyone claim that title?

Sirius had only one father. *Has* only one father. Man might be dead, but he's still Sirius' father, and Thor better not go around calling himself any type of father to Sirius, or there will be hell to pay.

The ceremony begins, and a witch from the temple of Circe, a Wise Woman, steps in front of Fudge, to bear witness to the actual magical part of the ceremony.

Sirius and his wife link hands, and the Wise Woman rests her staff on their knuckles.

Sirius Vows to protect this stranger, to provide for her, to make her a part of his family, from now until his days are over.

She Vows to know no other man, and bear only his children.

Bellatrix would stab me, Sirius thinks. She always hated these old Vows, unbreakable in nature. *'How unfair! They should both vow to stay faithful'*, she hissed. *'Or better yet, neither should. They should trust each other they will be loyal, there's no need for magic to force it. Promise me you'll do better, when you marry, Sirius.'*

Sirius promised. He believed it when he said it, too.

And yet there he is.

Bella took no unbreakable vows, and neither did Rodolphus, and yet it seems their marriage is stronger than most anyone's else's, with an unshakable foundation and mutual respect.

The staff shines with magic, and golden links go over their clasped hands, settling into their skin, bounding them forevermore.

The Wise Woman congratulates them, offers them the blessing of her goddess.

Sirius wonders if his bride believes in gods and goddesses. Most people just acknowledge the Moon and the Sun, as their Mother and Father.

But Sirius only has one father, so while he enjoyed Litha and the festivities around it, in the Sun's honour, he only liked it because of the fascinating magical rituals, the good food, and meeting his friends and getting up to no good as their parents drank too much and forgot to reprimand them about manners.

Fudge drones on about marriage, and they wait for him to finish whatever he's on about, before signing the parchment with a blood quill that sets off the charm on it. The clock starts ticking; they will have twenty-four hours to consummate the marriage, otherwise the parchment will disappear from the Ministry.

Sirius swallows, suddenly nervous. He forgot about this part. *Fuck, I should have gotten more involved in this whole thing, I should have told them I don't want that charm.*

His heart hammers against his chest, even with all those potions doing their best to keep him calm.

There's not much time to freak out about it- it's too late, anyway- before Fudge declares them husband and wife, in the eyes of law and magic.

"You may kiss the bride."

Sirius bends and places a quick peck on her lips. Everyone cheers, and he almost flinches at the noise.

The clapping suddenly sounds like *thud*, and he's reminded of a dark night, the earth shifting under him with a deafening noise-

He shakes his head. He really needs more potions, clearly.

Then guests make their way to congratulate them.

The Prince comes first, with his small army.

Astrid offers him a deep curtsy. "Thank you for coming, Uncle."

Sirius offers him his hand. The man rolls his eyes, and takes it, and he mutters something in Russian. Sirius understands nothing but 'Blacks'.

"A powerful match," he says, switching to a heavily accented English. "May it serve both your Houses well. Do visit us next summer," he says, letting go of Sirius' hand. "The Emperor misses his grand daughter, Black. He loves her so," he adds, slightly threatening.

It's expected, as a groom, to receive veiled threats from family members of the bride.

Sirius' weren't veiled, when he told Rodolphus he'll eviscerate him if he ever hurts Bella. Sadly, Rodolphus laughed, because Sirius was barely thirteen, reaching only Rodolphus' elbow. Rodolphus didn't laugh when Cygnus and Sirius' father 'had a word' with him.

Sirius was taller by the time Cissa married, two years later. *"If she as much as sheds a tear because of you, I'll cut your cock,"* he told Lucius. *"And your hair,"* he added, joking Lucius would care more about his hair than his cock.

No one was there to threaten Ted, Sirius thinks, saddened.

Not that any of it was needed. Bella, Cissa, and Andromeda could all handle their husbands perfectly well on their own, but it's just tradition, isn't it? A show of support, of love for the bride, and Andromeda had none of it.

"Very few Brits present," the Russian goes on. "I know you are only a tiny nation, but there's fewer than ever, I noticed."

"We had a war," Sirius reminds him. "Some people don't like me much right now."

"Ah." A smile. "You upset the commoners, I take it? Awfully sensitive they are."

And then he leaves, taking his hostile, paranoid looking guards with him.

It lasts forever, all sorts of people coming over to offer their well wishes.

The Russian wasn't wrong. Most people gathered there are foreign dignitaries, or members of old houses from all over Europe.

Sure, even before the war, Blacks didn't invite just any Brit to their events, kept it to their tight circles, but still- at least Ministry workers would have made an appearance, the Head Auror, members of the elected side of the Wizengamot.

Now, not so much. Sirius is deeply hated; at least, more hated than Blacks usually are by the general population.

No one believes he was innocent. *"It will pass,"* Lucius keeps saying, in a similar predicament.

Slughorn does show up, and he smiles at Sirius, kisses Astrid's hand and bores them for a couple of minutes.

The Egyptian president tells them he once taught both of their fathers at the Institute, and hopes one day a son born of such a union will attend the Institute as well.

"He's the best man in he world," Avery assures Astrid, with a smile, when his turn comes.

Apparently he still remembers how many times Sirius saved him from torture. Unfortunately, it makes Sirius remember it, too, remember Voldemort-

He shakes his head again.

Avery's own wife smiles, and at least they seem to be at ease around each other, a far cry from their wedding day, when she was weeping, and Avery wanted to run away.

Sirius' patience and potion induced calm is tested with every single guest that appears before them.

Regulus must notice, because he manifests at his side at some point, and when Sirius' jaws lock together, he takes over and thanks people for their platitudes.

Eventually, this part of the day ends, and they all head to the tables arranged in a different part of the garden, a new form of torture Sirius has to endure.

(-)

At the high table, his wife doesn't look at him, plays with her food, without eating a single thing.

Sirius isn't hungry either. He tries not to drink too much. They always pester him not to mix alcohol with potions.

He usually abstains, going to spend time with Harry whenever the need to drink hits him, but Harry isn't there now.

Since Azkaban, he's wary of crowds. And there are so many people there, all watching him, all wanting to speak to him.

It makes something inside him twist with panic, but Black don't panic, so that heavy, suffocating feeling turns to aggression instead, his temper rising as the minutes trickle by.

His mother watches him like a hawk from further down the table. She must understand his predicament, because a flash of concern mars her blank features. She makes a move to stand, but she aborts it at the last moment, because she is aware how fast she can set him off, like no one else in the world, even when she's not trying to.

Many times in the past weeks, when Sirius was too many hours away from his breakfast potions, but too many hours too soon for the next round, he found himself *raging* at his mother, snapping at her for little to no reason, suddenly so angry about that time when he was eight, and she congratulated Regulus for his French pronunciation, even if he slaughtered it, but she ignored Sirius completely, even if he did it perfectly; remembering, out of nowhere, that she once hit him on his birthday, or that one time he tried to kiss her cheek, on Witch Day, but she turned her head away.

"It's your fault," he growled at her, in the living room.*"Everything is your fault!"*

"You're a heartless hag," he yelled, in the kitchen. *"How could you not love your own son?"*

"I hate you!" he said, in his bed, when she woke him up from a nightmare in the early hours of the morning. Harry was crying, Snuffles was howling, Kreacher was trying to give him a potion, and she tried to hold Sirius, and he pushed her away. *"I hate you! I hate you! I wish I was dead!"*

And then the guilt, when he calmed down, sitting heavily in the pit of his stomach. The way he searched her out, quietly sat beside her, not knowing how to apologise, what to say.

"It's alright," she says. "You grew up watching me lash out in anger, you were often my target. How can I complain now, when you learned it from me?"

Their eyes meet over the table. *Help me.*

She whispers something in Regulus' ear, and then Regulus is the one moving, sitting at Sirius' side in mere moments, his hand on Sirius' leg, under the heavy tablecloth. He speaks about Egypt, casually, a string of meaningless words Sirius doesn't register, but he focuses on that calm tone of his.

And then Lucius is there, too, intercepting guests that are adamant to get to Sirius, to catch his attention, but Lucius keeps them at bay.

Even with all this help, Sirius only lasts another hour before he can't take it anymore.

He stands, turns around and marches towards the Manor, only thinking of taking the damn heavy robe off, because it's *suffocating* him- he's almost out of the party area before he remembers he's *married*, and he can't leave alone.

Shit.

He already resents her, even if it is not her fault.

He turns back, everyone is staring at him, and it's a good thing he doesn't have his wand on him, because his fingers twitch, eager- *you have Sirius' the First wand*, a dark whispers in his head reminds him, but he does his best to ignore it, bending slightly over Astrid, whispering in her ear. "Come."

To her credit, she doesn't flinch, doesn't run away, doesn't turn to her father to beg for help or anything like that; she stands, elegantly.

It's far too early to retire, but it's either that, or Sirius is going to end up cursing some people.

They walk in complete silence all the way to the Manor.

Talk to her. Put her at ease. You can be charming, especially with pretty girls.

He might have been, once. But not anymore. All his energy is always focused in keeping him alive, reminding his lungs to draw in air, his feet to move, his wand hand to stay still.

It's been that way since that dreadful Halloween and Sirius can't change it.

Even Harry- Harry is fine, most of the time. He helps Sirius get out of his head for a little while. Except those times when Sirius looks at him and suddenly sees James, suddenly sees Lily's accusing eyes.

Or until Harry moves his head, and his fringe falls to the side, and the scar-those times, Sirius sees Voldemort.

On his worst days, he almost prefers Azkaban. At least he couldn't hurt anyone there. At least he could turn into Padfoot and forget to be human, with all the pain that comes with it.

Once they reach the Manor, the noise from a hundred people dining and talking dims down. Sirius breaths in, turns to face his bride.

"Kreacher."

"Master."

"The elf will take you to your bedroom," he tells her, trying so hard to make his tone sound less like the harsh bark it's been lately. "I'll join you in half an hour."

She nods, not looking at him.

Sirius heads into the office.

He collapses into the chair as soon as he's inside, makes an effort to carefully take off the sash and the medals, laying them down gently. As soon as that's done, he rips open the robe-

It doesn't help. He feels no less strangled.

"Krea-"*He's with her.* "Tessuth!"

Nothing. She's probably sleeping or stabbing other elves, or simply ignoring him just because apparently she can.

He thinks to call for Dobby, but Dobby is with Harry.

"Tessuth!" he asks again. He waits a few seconds. "For Merlin's sake, you fucking elf, if you don't come, I'll skin you alive!"

"Master called?" Tessuth asks, glaring at him from around his elbow.

Sirius considers strangling her, decides against it only because he has more pressing matters.

"I need a robe, one of the casual ones. And I need my calming potion. Two. Bring two."

"Perhaps Master needs a sword, too. To skin Tessuth-"

Sirius lunges for her, but his fingers close around thin air.

He puts his forehead on the cool desk and waits. Tessuth is prone to take her time these days.

Better that way. It will gives Astrid time to relax.

He snorts. *Yeah, half an hour would calm her, no doubt about it.*

Can I even do it? Sirius thinks, anxious. Will he need to call for his elf to somehow find him, somewhere, a virility potion?

Sirius definitely never needed them before. If it was one thing in life that was predictable and unfailing, it used to be his cock.

Yet…he realises with a start he hadn't slept with anyone in a year.

Not since Voldemort.

He didn't even think of it.

He's been out of prison for three months, and not once did it cross his mind to have sex. He didn't even wank.

Fuck.

You can do it, he tries to reassure himself. *When you have her naked and she is so beautiful-*

Only she'll be terrified of him, and that won't help with anything.

He laughs, minutes on end.

He only stops when it starts sounding like he's crying.

"There," Tessuth pops into the room, shoves the robe and the potions at Sirius. "Is Master crying?"

"Go away!" Sirius uncorks a vial, downs it in one go.

Tessuth mutters something that sounds very similar to 'shameful', before snapping her fingers, and the ceremonial robe he wore gets replaced with the one she brought over.

"Tessuth is going back to sleep," she announces, thankfully disappearing,

Sirius stands, calmer already, though no more eager to go through the rest of the night.

On his way out, he stops by the liquor cabinet, takes a generous gulp out of a bottle.

He moves to the door, reconsiders, turns back and takes another sip.

Once more, when he's at the door, he returns to the cabinet; this time he retrieves the bottle and two glasses, takes them along.

(-)

"Come in." Her voice floats from her bedroom, when he's knocking at her door.

Sirius steadies himself and goes inside.

She's waiting for him in bed, the blanket up to her neck, in complete darkness.

No doubt someone taught her to do this.

Sirius vaguely remembers his aunt Druella giving this advice to Narcissa, on her wedding day, Bella rolling her eyes in a corner.

Sirius should have asked Lucius what he did when he went into her room and found his wife hiding under the bedcovers. It's only that it didn't even occur to him to ask about it; he simply, *somehow*, never actually processed the fact that he'll have to sleep with his wife.

"Close your eyes and think of England." He remembers saying that to a an alarmed Avery, long ago.

Why did I say that? Why did I laugh? How was that funny?

Sirius puts the bottle and glasses on the small table overlooking one of the smaller gardens. Thankfully, the party is taking place on the other side of the Manor.

He sees a house robe folded on one of the armchairs on either side of the table; he grabs it, walks to the bed, holding it in front of him.

"How about we talk for a little while?" he asks.

He waits for some awkward seconds, before she gets out from under the bedcovers.

He only gets a brief glimpse of a short, satin nightgown, before looking away, giving her some privacy, as she takes the robe and hastily throws it over herself.

He waves a hand; the candles in the room come to life.

Sirius gestures to the armchairs, and soon enough they are both sitting.

She really is beautiful, he thinks now that he can properly take her in. *Lucius has good taste.*

Sculpted, symmetrical features, huge, doe eyes, framed by thick, curled eyelashes, full lips. There's a beauty mark right above her right eyebrow.

Sirius thinks she's exactly the type of women he used to be attracted to; that if he'd seen her in a pub a couple of years ago, he'd have gone mad with desire.

He feels nothing now, only pity.

Sirius pours them both some whiskey, slides one glass towards her.

"Thank you," she says, taking a tiny, polite little sip. She tries to hide her cough.

"It gets easier," he tells her.

That sharp, strong burn will eventually turn pleasant. At least it did, for him.

He takes a measured sip as well, even if he'd like to drink it all in one go.

But the potion really did work, so he's fine. Mostly fine.

"So," he speaks into the uncomfortable silence. He pauses. What can he say?

How do you have the first conversation with your wife, in her bedroom, beside the bed they'll have to fuck in before the sun is up?

"I hope you like England," he goes on, lamely.

"It's lovely," she says.

Definitely a polite one. And a good liar; there's nothing on her face to indicate deceit.

He waits, in case she wants to add to it, but nothing else comes.

"I've been to Norway a couple of times," he offers. *Last time I killed a cousin of yours or something like that. Well, Voldem-*

No. Don't think of him.

"When I was very young. My father had business in Oslo and we stayed with an acquaintance of his for a couple of weeks."

"I know. I saw you," she says. "My father also had business with Mr Lund."

"You were there?"

She nods again. "We only stayed for a couple of days."

He remembers three girls, vaguely. All younger than him. He was only ten years old, completely uninterested in girls. He spent his time there playing with Lund's sons, mock duels and causing general mayhem.

"Was I nice?" he asks, knowing he probably wasn't. He'd been a horror of a child, spoiled and entitled, knowing he could get away with everything, because no one would dare complain to his father about his behaviour.

She hesitates. "Yes."

He snorts. "I was probably rude."

"All boys are," she says and then she tenses. "I mean, at that age-"

"Astrid, can you look at me, please?" She hadn't, so far, keeping her eyes only in his general direction.

She swallows, audibly, and meets his eyes.

“You don’t need to watch your words around me,” he says, as gently as he remembers he once had the ability to be. “I don’t care about most conventional stuff-“

“Conventional?” she enquires, looking anxious, the word rolling on her tongue experimentally.

“Ah- about traditions and things like that,” he says. “I don’t care if you say ‘the wrong thing’ or whatever. You can talk freely.”

She doesn’t believe him, suspicion fleeting in her eyes, but she nods either way.

“No one will hurt you here. My brother is the best man in the world, according to everyone, including my mum. He’s a gentleman, and well behaved and all that. You’ll like him. Everyone does. And you’ll like Harry, too. I guarantee you’ve never met a kid as sweet as Harry.”

She smiles, a tiny thing. “I saw you with him from the window these past days. You played with him in the gardens. You seem like you have patience with him.”

With Harry, he does. With most anyone else…

I have to be as patient as I can with her.

“I am told he is your ward?”

“He is. Harry is not my bastard son or anything like that,” he assures her, just in case she gets any ideas. Men sometimes do that, have a child outside marriage and pass it off as a ward. And then their wives proceed to treat said child like shit, because they consider it a threat to their own children, especially if the child is a boy. “I’ll show you pictures of his parents, he’s the splitting image of his dad.”

He takes another sip.

“Mother, she’s-“ Sirius searches around for a word. “She’s -" He can’t seem to find any. “Well, she usually likes women.” At least better than men, which is not saying much, granted. “She’s -she’ll be fine, I’m sure. If not, tell me. Is she’s difficult to please or being unreasonable, I’ll handle it. You’ll be safe and content with my family. We will visit Narcissa often, and I hear you two get along well.”

They’ll just have to hide Bella, for a while. And how on earth will he explain Andromeda? The Kristiansens, from the little he knows of them, are blood purists. His father was somewhat friendly with her father, and Sirius knows his father would never associate with a blood traitor- one that isn’t his son, that is.

Her eyes search his face, and under the hint of anxiety, there is shrewdness there.

Sirius doesn’t think this one is an airhead.

“How about you?” she asks. “Are you easy to please?”

What a question.

“Yes,” Sirius says, because as far as she is concerned, Sirius wants nothing from her. That would please him best.

‘Avoid me’ should be an easy thing for her to accomplish.

“I told you, I’m not the traditional type. You don’t need to worry about anything when it comes to me. You just- you do what you want, really. Anytime you want it.”

Her expression is guarded, but he detects some curiosity.

Of course, they are expected to have a child, a male heir, but it’s best not to mention that. They both know it, anyway.

“I’m sure you know I’ve been to prison,” he goes on.

A curt nod.

“Since then- I like to keep to myself, these days,” he explains. “So you won’t have to put up with me often.”

Except when we have to fuck.

Gods, this is so fucked up. He really should have married Bella. Or Narcissa. Or Andromeda. Or at least someone he knew from his childhood. It would be easier.

A brief silence falls over the room, before she breaks it.

“Your elves- I am not sure if the customs are the same in my country- how should I act with them? I’ve heard contradictory advice.”

“However you want,” Sirius assures her. “Well, actually, best avoid Tessuth, though she’ll leave with Grandfather back to his house soon enough. With the other two, whatever it comes natural to you. Though you might want to keep in mind my mother is quite fond of Kreacher; he’s the old one. I suggest, first thing tomorrow, that you order him to never complain to Mother about you or whatever interactions you might have.”

Kreacher will have to obey her; he has to obey all of them, but Sirius is the Head of the House, the one that truly owns Kreacher. And this girl- Astrid- is his wife, replacing his mother as lady of the house. In theory, at least.

They speak for a little while longer. Sirius finishes his drink, pours himself another. She doesn’t touch hers.

But at least they talk. He asks about Drumstrang, she asks about Hogwarts. He asks about her sisters and her brother. She doesn’t ask about Harry’s parents, she doesn’t ask about the war.

Smart.

“Did you have a boyfriend? Or a boy you liked?”

For a second she looks *insulted*, before her face falls back into a pleasant expression. “I assure you, my purity is proven. It’s in the contract-”

Gods. “No, no-I mean-” He closes his eyes for a second. He just wanted to know if she at least has some experience with men, or if she’s pining over someone, or anything that he can work with, seeing that they have only a dozen or so more hours before they have to fuck.

“Have you ever been kissed?”

For a second, he’s sure she will say ‘no’, regardless of the truth. But a faint blush climbs to her cheek.

“I have, yes, but nothing indecent took place-”

“Good,” he cuts over her. “I would question Norwegians boys sanity if no one has ever kissed you. If you’d have attended Hogwarts, you’d have had many boys trailing after you, me probably chief amongst them.” Though, she’s four years younger than him, and Sirius generally had crushes on girls older than him. But it works, and she blushes again, smiles a bit. Her smile is as beautiful as the rest of her, and it serve to make her look less cold, more… human.

“Most boys were too afraid of my brother to ask me on sanctioned school balls- he’s only a year older than I, so we went to school together.”

He laughs. He never had that issues, he was never scared of any older brothers he might annoy. “But there’s always a daring one, no?”

“There was, yes. Nothing serious,” she repeats.

He stands, moves slowly to her side, hold out his hand. No reason to prolonge the inevitable.

She takes his hand, and she stands, too.

“And you like kissing?” he asks.

She hums, and some tension gathers in her shoulders.

“May I kiss you?”

She nods.

(-)

When he goes back to his room, he's tempted to take the potions Kreacher arranged for him neatly on the nightstand, as he does every night.

But if he takes them, he'd be asleep in mere minutes. And he wants so badly to knock himself out, but he also wants to shower, so he heads to the bathroom, first.

It went fine.

Sirius did his duty, and so did Astrid. No one cried. Sirius was careful, he was gentle, he asked permission before every step, and she granted it.

The worst moment was when it crossed his mind, as he made sure to tell her everything he was going to do before he did it, that this was why he always liked experienced partners, often older than he was, why he avoided virgins, because it's so nerve-wracking going through sex with fear of scaring or hurting his partner.

And that, of course, made him think of the last virgin he slept with, and it all derailed from there, images of Voldemort pressed into the wall.

He always thinks of Voldemort, every second of every day, one way or another, and it always hurts, and when it doesn't hurt, it makes him so terribly *angry*, no matter how much his Healer and mother keep drugging him.

So he was sure, as the images slammed so forcefully into his mind, that it will end badly.

It didn't. He was already hard, purely a physical response, his body reacting like a well-trained dog at being in bed with a naked woman- or almost naked; he thought it best to let her keep her short, satin little nightgown, to give her some sort of fucked up privacy- but when he thought of Voldemort, Sirius felt true arousal, true *need*, burning in his abdomen. He was surprised at the intensity of his want, at how alive it made him feel, after all these months of being dead inside.

He forced Voldemort out of his head, made an effort to focus on Astrid, to stay present.

It was *fine*. She responded to him, shyly, uncertain, but she did, and while she didn't come, he thinks she would have if he put his mind to it, but he thought they would both rather just end it as soon as possible.

Once upon a time Sirius fucked strangers all the time, some of whom he talked even less than he had with Astrid, so he doesn't understand why this was so difficult; he even fucked people he didn't really want to fuck, just going with the motions, because he was too drunk or high, and he'd sort of have a moment of clarity only when he was already in bed with some woman he couldn't even recognise, and he'd think *'might as well'* and do what was expected of him, but either he grew up, either he's broken now after Voldemort- whatever the case, it was difficult.

At least she seemed alright, afterwards. Her carefully constructed blank expression was long lost, her cheeks red, and she hid her face in his chest for some moments, but when she looked at him, eventually, she offered him a small smile.

"Alright?"

She nodded. She seemed relieved. Who knows what horrors she'd imagined beforehand, what stories she heard from aunts or older sisters or whatnot.

"Tired?"

He was exhausted, and he imagined she must be, too. If he found his process of getting ready for the wedding tiresome, he knows she had an even longer day, that a horde of women chatted and worried and gave her awful advise as they did her hair and makeup, and fit her into her robes.

"Yes," she confirmed, and he squeezed her hand, hopefully in a reassuring manner, and got the fuck out of there, because he can't even imagine going to sleep with anyone that isn't his mother or Harry, and Astrid probably didn't want to fall asleep with a stranger, one that everyone knows has an awful temper and just got out of prison.

Gods, we'll have to keep doing it until she gets pregnant. He shudders under the spray of water. Now he understands why everyone wants a boy, so desperately. Sirius hopes for a boy, too, because if they get one, then they can stop.

It won't be as odd, he tells himself. There won't be any time pressure, any charm to force them into it. They can take their time, they can get to know each other better, he can charm her, and she seemed like a decent girl-

Charm her? You barely speak these days, and mostly to Harry, who doesn't need you to say much.

That, or screaming his head off when he's in a bad moment and his poor mother happens to be in his sight. He never loses it on anyone else; it's just her that gets all of his anger.

Doesn't matter, we have time now. And if it take years to get better, then it takes years, and that's that.

You'll never get better.

"Shut up!" he snarls.

Everyone says he will get better, and so far, his family was proven right, every single time. Why not in this, too? If only he could convince that little cruel voice in his head, that sense of doom and hopelessness that never leaves him, even when he swallows all his potions.

Chapter End Notes

By now, you probably aren't shocked this is a split chapter. It goes together with the next one, that will be published Saturday (13 April). So, if it's too depressing, it wasn't supposed to be, I just lost track of the word count and wrote more than was needed.

Thank you all for reading! As always, I would love to hear your thoughts! ❤️

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astrid smiles at him the following day. She avoids his eyes, but he thinks it's shyness, not fear or disgust. He doesn't really care, he just took his potion moments before, so his thoughts don't affect his mood at all.

Astrid's mother glares at Sirius something fierce, and she has the steely eyes of her brother. Astrid's married older sister also glares at him, but the younger one blushes and giggles and smiles.

Breakfast is tense, too many proud people at just one table. First meal with his in-laws. Regulus was right, he should have taken the time to properly meet these people beforehand.

Thor sounds like a horrible man. Astrid's brother sounds like a prick.

He sounds like you used to sound, a year ago.

Luckily, his grandfather carries most of the conversation, with Thor, and Sirius' grandmother chats in rapid fire german with Thor's mother. Sirius' german isn't as good as it could have been, but he understands enough to be surprised they aren't fighting, even if his grandmother is usually quarrelsome.

He disappears as soon as the meal is done, takes Harry to the gardens, now thankfully free of people. All the guests have left.

"Missed you kiddo," Sirius says, hugging him tightly.

"Missed you, too!" Harry assures him, his little face tucked in Sirius' neck.

Snuffles howls, running in circles around them.

"Missed you, too, you bastard," Sirius assures him, and he gets another howl.

He spends all day with them, manages to avoid lunch, but there's no avoiding dinner.

However, Astrid's mother isn't glaring at him anymore, neither is the older sister. Their eyes have warmed, and they even smile at him, so he assumes they talked with Astrid and she must have had good things to say about him, since apparently no one wants to behead him any longer.

(-)

It's odd having a stranger in Grimmauld Place, eating at his table, living there. A part of Sirius still expects her to …go away, eventually. His mind hasn't yet gotten used to the idea that she will never go away.

Her parents and relatives left for Norway a week after the wedding, and she looked after them, longingly, as they climbed into their carriage. As odd as it is for him to have her around, it must be even odder for her.

He only sees her for breakfast and dinner; very silent affairs, once Regulus goes back to Egypt, and his grandfather returns to his own house, taking Tessuth with him, to everyone's relief.

They were the only one trying to make small talk.

Sirius thinks of trying, a few times, but…he doesn't have the energy.

His mother shuts up, too, and he doesn't know why; either trying to be helpful, not wanting to scare the girl, either because she, too, is uncomfortable with a stranger in the house.

"She should have my bedroom," his mother says when they leave the Black manor to return to Grimmauld. "It's supposed to be belong to the lady of the house-"

"No one is taking your bedroom." Unthinkable. That's his mother's room, no one else's.

Sirius is unsure what bedroom the girl got, but he thinks it's on the second floor. He heard Kreacher muttering something about it at some point.

"You have to take her out, Sirius. Introduce her to society," Lucius keeps insisting, whenever they meet so Harry and Draco can play.

At first, Harry was too shy, and Draco too used to having everything go his way. Unsurprisingly, when his usual playmates were Crabbe and Goyle's sons.

But Lucius told Draco: *"Harry is not like Gregory and Vincent; Harry is family, so you have to play nice, Draco. Don't be rude."*

The boys sort themselves out in no time.

Apparently Draco enjoys Harry's company better than the other kids, according to Narcissa, who warms up to Harry just on account of that.

"He's so polite," she says, smiling, watching over the boys. "And he looks so much like Potter- like James, that is."

Draco looks like Lucius. It's odd, watching a miniature James playing and laughing with a miniature Lucius.

"Can't we have some time for ourselves?"

"It's been a month," Lucius doesn't give up. "Get her out of the house!"

The last thing Sirius wants is to make social calls, so he ignores Lucius, brushes it off.

Until his grandfather comes visiting, and he reminds Sirius he has duties.

“You’ve done harder things in your life than making a few house calls,” the old man reminds him.

And so, the tour starts. The Malfoys, the Notts, the Greengrasses, the Crabbs; on and on, it never seems to end.

Apparently, Parkinson had a wedding and a whole daughter at some point. Harry’s age, no less. *When did this happen?*

“I told you, but you were too… distracted, at the time,” Lucius offers.

It must have happened when the world was at Sirius’ feet, when he spent his every moment with Voldemort, secluded in their- in Voldemort’s cabin.

Avery and his wife get along well, and apparently she redecorated the entire Manor, because it’s much better looking than what Sirius remembers from his childhood.

Yaxley is as stable as ever, his wife as aloof as ever, their daughter a little blond hellion that looks at Sirius and says ‘huh, you were more handsome in the pictures’. Everyone tenses, but Sirius laughs, because he’s surrounded by people that are so careful with him and his fragile little self- an eight year old girl’s honesty is refreshing.

But most of the Death Eaters either don’t have children, or they’re too young to talk, so sadly there are few kids to make him laugh.

Sirius hates some of these men, and he’s not feeling very chatty these days, so Lucius and Narcissa often accompany him and Astrid around.

Often, Sirius has to remind himself these are his people. The ones that stood by him in his time of need; hate them or not, they have to stick together, former Death Eaters in a world where it’s not fashionable to have been one.

“The outrage won’t last long,” Lucius, preoccupied with such things, assures him. “We just have to lay low for a while, do some charities, and then people will forget.”

It’s through these visits that Sirius gets to know a little about Astrid, sitting beside her as one wife or another asks her all sorts of mind-numbing questions about her childhood, her family, the social circles in Norway.

Lucius really outdid himself. Astrid is a gracious woman, elegant, poised, perfectly mannered as she manoeuvres her way into the British social scene.

And she makes for a perfect host, when Lucius and Narcissa insist they should host a party at the Black manor.

Astrid comes up to him shortly before the guests are set to arrive. “I memorised many things, but I’m afraid I might be mixing the Notts with the Rowles- who is more important? I need to know whose wife gets served tea first.”

“Nott,” he says, and she smiles.

“I had it right, then. But better to check.”

“You don’t have to bother, really,” Sirius advises her. “You can mess up the tea order or whatever- no one would dare say anything about it. They’re all irrelevant. Only Narcissa matters. As long as you remember that, the rest don’t matter much.”

Her smile never fades. “Even so; I don’t want to embarrass you. I like to get things right.”

“I’m not easily embarrassed. Just relax- if you like them, fine. If you don’t like them, you don’t have to pretend.”

For a second, she looks at him like he’s insane, but she hides it fast.

As the guests arrive, Sirius is reminded that she was raised the same way women are raised in the Twenty-Eight, and this is probably her entire life, what she was trained for since childhood.

The party isn’t as bad as he feared. Mid way through it, Sirius rediscovers the pleasures of firewhisky.

“Dance with me,” Narcissa demands at some point, the only one brave enough to approach Sirius, brooding in an armchair, further away from the rest.

He gives her a look. “I thought women don’t invite men to-”

“Lucius has to dance with Astrid, since you won’t,” Narcissa hisses. She gestures in the distance, where Lucius is spinning Astrid around. They make for a pleasant sight, the contrast between them only highlighting both of their attributes; he, blond and tall, and her with jet black hair and slim constitution. *She really is beautiful,* Sirius thinks. “So you’ll dance with me.”

“Lucius doesn’t *have* to, I’m sure someone else would-”

“Are you crazy? Have you seen yourself lately? Who do you think has the nerve to invite your wife to dance when you look ready to snap someone’s neck at any second?”

Sirius sighs. “Cissa, I’m-”

“Dancing,” she hisses. “You’re dancing. Now.”

She has that look about her, the one that allows no room for disagreement. People are lucky she’s not inclined to violence, otherwise she’d have been as dangerous as Bella, and the world wouldn’t have been able to handle two of them.

And so, even if he would have never thought he'd ever dance again, Sirius gets up and offers Narcissa his arm.

It's wrong. The grand room, the silverware, the perfect robes, the shining jewellery; the smiling women-

It's all wrong, and empty, and Sirius feels so estranged from all of it, so far away, but apparently, even if still not completely recovered from Azkaban, his muscles remember the motions, and he leads Narcissa through a waltz.

Several times, he slips into a dark, cold place, the screams of dozens of inmates ringing in his ears, but then Narcissa' soft, warm fingers grip him a little tighter, and he finds himself back in his country manor, with his alive, beautiful cousin, and the music replaces the screams.

They're all a little different, Sirius supposes, as the night progresses and he looks more carefully at his guests, when Narcissa somehow forces him to socialise with them. None are as fucked up as Sirius, but most of the men in the room- they're not what they used to be. Their smiles are a little forced, they are all a little twitchy, a little quieter than they used to be, before.

It's to the women they turn; they are the same as always; perhaps checking on their husbands or brothers a bit more than usual, as if making certain they're still there, or whispering into their ears, a gentle hand on their backs, but otherwise, their eyes hadn't hardened, there's no knowledge buried in their heads of things they've done, of horrible sights that will never leave them.

They'd all be lost without the women in their lives.

And poor Narcissa is working double, split between Sirius and Lucius, though it's Sirius that gets most of her attention, because Lucius is…Lucius. He always had his shit together, and he is one of the few men in that room that wasn't even arrested, not really, hadn't spent a second even in the Ministry's lame holding cells.

Yaxley wasn't either, but Yaxley had seen some shit Lucius hadn't, because Voldemort knew Lucius' political skills, his influence was of far more use, so he wasn't risked in battle unnecessarily. Yaxley has shadows that dance in his eyes, and he gets lost in his head, often.

It's because of Abraxas, a voice whispers in his head. Yaxley's father is dead, but Abraxas, even if unusually quiet in the war, is alive, and Sirius remembers Voldemort met with him with some regularity, even if Abraxas never carried the mark.

Cygnus is alive, too, he was there to meet with Voldemort, to keep an eye on him, but Bellatrix doesn't listen to Cygnus the way Lucius listens to his father.

The Malfoys stood together; Lucius and Abraxas do not get along at all, and Sirius does not doubt Lucius liked Voldemort more than he liked his father, but the Malfoys are a unit, a team, no matter their feelings for each other. Lucius will always listen to his father, over Voldemort, over anyone else. Abraxas will always be there, in the shadows, protecting his legacy. Even Narcissa- she's one of them now, and she acts the part. Sirius knows she

despised Voldemort, and he can imagine many discussions she had in private with Lucius, but Narcissa never shows dissent in public, she'll always show support for Lucius, stand at his side, unflinchingly. Like that, they can weather any storm.

(-)

He hears his grandfather and his mother fighting, as Sirius approaches one of the living rooms.

What is he doing here? His grandfather moved back to his house shortly after the wedding; he does visit, but usually he gives notice.

"He needs the potions!" His mother's voice is shrill.

"He doesn't need that many! He's…mindless. It's as if his body is going through the motions but his mind is not there to-"

"If you'd have ever seen how he gets when he misses his potions, even by an hour, then you wouldn't say he doesn't need them-"

"Of course he reacts badly without them! He's *addicted*! Tell her, Hartwood! Tell her she's giving him too much!"

"Tell this horrid man my son needs them!" his mother yells. "It's for his own good! And you said nothing about it, you didn't complain when he was too numb to protest to a marriage-"

"He's married now. I want him clear-headed! He's the Head of the House, he can't walk around without his faculties-"

Sirius enters the room. His mother's face is bright red, twisted with anger.

His grandfather's expression is as blank as always.

Hartwood looks exhausted already, and slightly terrified, standing between them.

Because Sirius just took his mid-day potions, he isn't angry with them for speaking about him behind his back. Just mildly irritated.

"Out," he says, taking a seat. "Or do you plan to hold my hand during the examination, Mother? As if I am a child? Oh, wait, you never did that when I was an actual child."

Once his relatives fuck off, Hartwood takes out his wand, moves it over Sirius, in silence.

"Am I taking too many potions?" Sirius asks.

Hartwood hesitates. “More than I prescribed, from my understanding,” he finally says. “Your mother says the initial dosage was…insufficient.”

“Hmm. She’s probably right. I would probably rip off some heads without the potions.”

Hartwood bites his lip. “The more you take, they have the potential to- Instead of being therapeutic, if you abuse them, they could turn detrimental and increase your …anger. The effects will last less and less, and you’ll need more. It is an ugly circle.”

“What is your advice?”

“I would lower the dosage, gradually. Do not listen to Mr Black- the other Mr Black, that is. You cannot simply go off them, just like that. It would prove disastrous. But, yes- your mother shouldn’t have given you more than I prescribed, either.”

“Then lower the dose,” Sirius says. “I’ll order my elf to abide by the new regiment, instead of listening to my mother. Does this mean I can drink again?”

Hartwood’s eye twitches. “I wouldn’t recommend it. But you’re already drinking, so…”

Sirius snorts. He is not drinking. A glass here and there is *hardly* drinking.

“You no longer need the other potions, either. You are no longer malnourished.”

Sirius snorts again. “You haven’t seen me naked.”

“I know you are thinner than…before, but medically, you aren’t malnourished. Only slightly underweight. I believe you can try to gain the rest of the weight back on your own, with regular meals, without the aid of nutrient potions.”

“Those are the ones that taste like shit, aren’t they?”

“Indeed.”

“Then scrape them off.”

“Without as many calming potions, you will gain some of your energy back. I doubt very much you can do more than walk right now, under their influence. Once you lower your intake, you should be able to do more physical activities.” He coughs, looks away. “It will also help with your...hmm-hmm…sexual drive. Your grandfather complained about that, voiced…concerns.”

“Merlin’s cock!” Sirius hisses.

He’ll have to have a serious talk with Kreacher or whoever is spying on him and his bedroom activities, reporting back to his awful fucking family. He did wonder when someone would ask him why he hasn’t been in Astrid’s bedroom since their wedding night, but he didn’t believe it would be so soon.

“Does that- do the potions interfere with that?”

“They can. Not necessarily, but…they do keep you…uh…unstimulated, in general. Anger, joy, arousal…everything is dimmed down.”

Sirius rather doubts this in particular had anything to do with the potions, that it has everything to do with Vo-

He shakes his head, pushing the thought down.

(-)

Sirius moves Mrs Pettigrew to Black Manor.

Her sister attempts to stop him, calling the Aurors, writing petitions to the Ministry, accusing Sirius of kidnapping her, but not much comes of it.

Dawlish sends him a somewhat threatening letter to bring Mrs Pettigrew to the Ministry.

When Sirius complies, Mrs Pettigrew assures Dawlish she came with Sirius willingly.

“She doesn’t understand what is going on,” her sister cries, desperate. “Auror, please, she isn’t… well. She doesn’t understand-“

“Sh, Lauren, don’t cry!” Mrs Pettigrew says, smiling. “It’s a lovely manor! And I have a little elf to help me around! Peter will love it when he comes back home.”

Lauren only cries harder.

Dawlish’s eye twitches. “Nothing I can do,” he spits at the woman. “If she wants to stay with Black, then-”

“But she’s not well! She doesn’t understand-“

“I have a Healer note here declaring her sane and capable,” Dawlish says. “Gods know if that’s true or not, but if you have a complaint, take it with St Mungo. My hands are tied.”

“They faked it!” Laureen screams. “They have gold and they made a Healer write that!” She’s right, but she’ll have a hard time proving it. “Look at her, she’s not in her right mind, she hasn’t been for years-”

“Laureen, that’s not nice!” Mrs Pettigrew grows frightened, confused. She clutches her little old purse with one hand, with the other she clutches Sirius’ hand.

“I have real issues here, woman,” Dawlish declares. He does, attempting to hunt down wayward werewolves. The entire department is busy with it, Lucius says. “The mother of a Death Eater is the least of my concerns.”

“I’m sorry, Sirius,” Mrs Pettigrew says, when they leave the Ministry, Laureen screaming and crying after them. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

Dobby goes over daily to Black Manor, to make sure she has all she needs; Hartwood comes weekly to administer her treatment.

Peter will never have the opportunity to see her again; he won’t be able to bypass the Manor’s protection, as a rat or otherwise.

He’ll never know what is happening to her, nor will he set his eyes on her ever again.

“She will never see him again, either,” his mother pointed out, when Sirius informed them what he was about to do. *“You’re punishing her, too.”*

“She raised a coward. A traitor,” his grandfather dismissed it. *“She should be thanking her lucky stars Sirius has a kind heart, and this is the only thing that will happen to her.”*

Peter made sure Sirius will never see James again.

It might not be fair for Mrs Pettigrew, but Sirius tells himself she wouldn’t have seen Peter much, anyway. That Peter would have come to check on her as a rat, from time to time, too cowardly to transform and risk having her or her sister talk about it in public.

Sirius is not taking anything from her. Just from him.

And when she dies, which Hartwood insists won’t be much longer, only then will Sirius find and kill Peter. First, let him stew in the knowledge Sirius has his mother.

That Sirius’ *grandfather* has his mother, more importantly. Peter might doubt Sirius would hurt her, but Peter would believe the rest of the Blacks capable of it.

She is the reason Pete betrayed him. He’s been spying on Sirius for over a year, and clearly his mother’s life was held over his head. So he traded James’ life for hers.

Instead of telling Sirius about it. An *entire fucking year*.

It’s justice that Peter loses any access to his mother, when he bought her life with James’.

Mrs Pettigrew stays in her quarters, almost immobile these days, though Sirius orders Dobby to take her out into the gardens every day, because she loves the gardens so much.

He visits her sometimes, and she’s always happy to see him.

“Where is Peter?” she asks, every time.

“He’s away with work, Mrs Pettigrew. I told you, he found a great job, so he’s busy with that for now.”

“But he’ll come home, soon?”

“He will,” he says, and she smiles.

No one outside his family knows what is happening to her. Most people assume he killed her, or he’s subjecting her to horrible things.

Lucius knows Sirius too well to imagine that, but the other Death Eaters are ready to assume that she is treated and punished as a traitor’s mother would be.

The rumour spreads, but Sirius does nothing to stop it. His family’s ruthless reputation saved him before. Sirius is determined to keep that reputation alive and well.

(-)

Once he remembers how much he liked to drink, now that he’s not numbed on potions at all times, Sirius finds a new way to spend the nights, instead of shivering in his bed, staring at the ceiling.

And the parties- there’s so many of them, two every weekend. There were always parties in the past, but not quite like this.

Now, it’s as if all of them want to pretend everything is as it was, return to activities they used to enjoy, so they’re overcompensating.

But the alcohol is of quality, the girls look stunning, and the company slowly grows on Sirius. He still doesn’t like crowds, they put him on edge, but these gatherings are not just any crowd. They are his people.

Sirius gets to know Astrid a little more, actually talks to her, here and there, either at the parties, or at home, about some rumour they heard or about something stupid Crabbe did, or some salacious gossip Astrid uncovered.

His mother seems pleased with this development, watching them closely as Kreacher serves them breakfast.

On weekdays, Sirius takes her along to Malfoy Manor, with Harry.

And that- that he likes the best, more than the parties, even if he can’t drink with the kiddo there. But he likes to see Narcissa smile, enjoying Astrid’s company, as they gossip in the garden; he likes to see Harry and Draco toddling around, laughing loudly.

One day, when both boys fall off a small tree they were attempting to climb, when an owl spooks them, Draco starts bawling and flees to his mother’s arms, before Lucius even has the time to stand up.

And Harry- Harry almost never cries, and when he does, he always comes to Sirius. But, that day, Harry, shyly, uncertainly, follows Draco to where the girls sit, and he climbs on Astrid’s

lap. She hushes him, kisses his forehead, hugs him gently, checks him over, and-

No one will replace James and Lily, Sirius won't let that happen, but it's good to know Harry will have a mother figure in his life.

Sirius knows how important those are, after all.

(-)

"Master, filth at the door," Kreacher says, right in the middle of lunch.

Astrid looks up from her plate, curious.

His mother looks anxious, and Sirius hates that, *hates* that those fucking Hit Wizards strolled into their house, made her feel unsafe in her own home to the extent she gets nervous when someone knocks at their door.

All my fault. I should have never left, I should have never let the wards weaken.

The wards are strong now- no one will come past the front door without his permission.

"Who is it?" he asks Kreacher.

"One of Master's former friends."

His mother relaxes, replaces her fear with a sneer. "Send him away!" she orders.

"No."

"Sirius!" she snaps. "Don't go back into that awful crowd! They abandoned you, they-"

"*Mother.*"

She shuts up, clenches her jaws, throws her napkin on the table and leaves in a huff.

"Misless?" Harry asks, getting upset in his highchair.

Sirius sighs. "Her name isn't mistress, Harry," he says, once more. Harry sometimes calls Sirius' mother 'mistress', because that's what Dobby calls her, or he calls her 'mum', or 'mother' because that's what Sirius calls her.

"Misless is sad-"

"She's fine. Her name is Walburga, yes? Kreacher, let him into the dining room," he orders, though he'd rather not do this.

But Remus won't stop trying. He sent many letters already. And those are just the ones Sirius actually received once he felt well enough to enquire about his mail.

Sirius is certain Remus wrote before, but either his mother or his grandfather burned his letters without telling him.

Kreacher doesn't outright argue, the way he did before Azkaban. He mutters under his breath, though, about filth in their house, and 'Master making stupid choices'.

Astrid looks shocked, staring at Kreacher as if he sprouted another head. Sirius had never seen her so animated.

He guesses house-elves don't dare badmouth their masters in Norway.

"Excuse us for a moment," Sirius says, and her shock fades under one of her smiles.

"Of course."

Sirius takes Harry in his arms, focuses on him as he walks to the dining room, slowly, composing himself.

He didn't compose himself quite enough, because when he enters the living room and he sees Remus-

Something twists in his chest, longing and pain, and even happiness. Sadness, too.

Remus doesn't look well. He never did, always too thin, always sickly, but now, surrounded by expensive furniture, he looks even worse.

"Sirius," he whispers, brown-green eyes searching Sirius' face.

"Good afternoon."

Remus flinches.

What did you expect? Yet when he opens his mouth, Sirius doesn't want to hear what Remus expected, though he knows he can't avoid it. But he can prologue it. He can do them all a kindness, first, before there will be no more room for such things.

"Harry, look." He shifts Harry a bit, so he can face Remus. "This is your father's friend. Say 'hello'."

"Hello!" Harry offers.

Remus looks so grief struck that Sirius finds it hard to watch him. Yet he did harder things in his life, so he does.

"Harry…" Remus whispers, eyes pained. "You've gotten so big!"

"I'm a big boy," Harry says, proudly, with a smile.

It's because his mother keeps saying, *'You are a big boy, and big boys don't talk while they eat.'. 'You're a big boy, and big boys don't throw food at the elves.'*

On, and on. There's a long list of what big boys don't do, one Sirius remembers all too well from his childhood.

"Ignore her," Sirius always tells Harry. *"You do what you want."*

"You look so much like your father," Remus whispers, awed.

Harry frowns. "No, I don't."

It's like a knife to the heart. "You do," Sirius says, gently, even if Harry looks at him, confused.

There are many pictures of James in the nursery, some of Lily, too.

He picked up the albums from Peter's house, when he took charge of Mrs Pettigrew.

Yet Harry doesn't truly understand the people on the walls are his parents.

"Are you Daddy?" he just recently asked Sirius, after they spent the day at Malfoy Manor.

'Daddy' is the most used word in Draco's vocabulary, after all.

"No," Sirius said, taking him closer to the pictures, lifting him up. *"James is your father."*

But Harry doesn't really understand.

He will. He will grow, and he'll understand, soon enough.

"He's…confused," Sirius says, to Remus, and if he weren't a Black, it would sound defensive. "He knows about James, I always tell him about him, but he's too small to understand."

Remus nods, coughs, dabs at his eyes with his sleeve. "Of course."

Gods, just do it. It's not like you haven't lost him years ago.

"Dobby."

"Master?"

"Take Harry to Astrid."

He wanted to give Remus that, first. To let him see Harry.

"No! Walk!" Harry demands, when Sirius tries to give him to Dobby.

"Alright."

Harry is quite stubborn, so Sirius knows better than to argue. Not that he ever argues; whatever Harry wants, Harry gets, so Dobby only follows closely behind him, as Harry gets out.

"What do you want?" he asks, as soon as he's gone.

Sirius knows what he wants, he read the first two letters he got from Remus. He stopped reading after that, but he knows enough.

Remus apologised for believing the worst of Sirius, for ever believing he would betray James. He apologised, *absurdly*, for not realising Peter was the traitor.

As if anyone saw that coming.

If he'd have left it at that, it would have been…it would have hurt less.

'Dumbledore told me he spoke to you, when you went for Harry, that he's certain your loyalty for James never wavered.'

That hurt. That Remus needed fucking Dumbledore to tell him that.

Sirius understands why Remus believed him a Death Eater; not only was Sirius one, but even if he hadn't been…he is a Black, his temper was always awful, he said many stupid things in the years they've known each other, and, once, he sent Snape straight to the werewolf's jaws, risking the life Remus managed to built for himself, the uncertain future, but a future. He understands.

Yet the fact that Remus, or *anyone*, would ever think Sirius would knowingly put James in danger…that hurt so badly.

"Sirius, I-" Remus trails off.

He's lonely, Sirius knows. Padfoot can feel how lonely Moony is, without his pack.

You can't, he reminds himself. *You are Head of House Black, and Remus doesn't belong in your new life.*

You fucked Voldemort, you loved him, you protected men that despise Remus' kind, you party with them every weekend. You don't belong at his side.

The Head of House Black doesn't have friends. There's only family, and the family interest.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have- I'm sorry I believed it. I should have known you wouldn't, I should have told Dumbledore, or the Aurors, I- I'm sorry."

"I am a Death Eater."

"Dumbledore told me you spied for him, that you were a-"

"I *am*."

Sirius will always be a Death Eater; all of those that took the mark will be. They use past tense, but the magic on their arm, twisted around their souls, is there forever. Dormant it may be, right now, but they'll carry it inside them until they die.

Marks like that never go away. The ink faded, completely, but the scars didn't- nothing heals dark magic.

Sometimes Sirius stares at those scars, hours on end, at night, with a candle in his other hand. He keeps the candle close over his left forearm, closer and closer, until the flames lick at his skin.

"I chose Voldemort," he says. "And if he hadn't targeted James, I would have never abandoned him. So, pat yourself on the back, Lupin. Good job, ten points to Gryffindor. You were right all along."

Remus swallows. "Why?"

"You should have asked back then, instead of staring at me with suspicion. Perhaps, if you'd have asked early enough, you'd have found I hadn't *gone bad* quite as early as you thought. You were my friend- if you'd have asked, we'd have talked of it. You can't ask me now. I owe you no explanation."

"Sirius-"

"It's Mr Black," Sirius says, and it is *hard* to say it, to hold Remus' eyes as he does it.

But he had done harder things.

Remus suffers, it's right there on his face, but Remus had suffered harder things, too.

This isn't new, in any case. They broke apart long ago, a fracture that started when the Snape thing happened.

"You're just like your family," James said, angry. Remus said nothing, but it was clear he thought the same, as he laid in his hospital bed, betrayed and scared.

Sirius is not just like his family, he *is* his family.

"I don't accept your apology. We have nothing to say to each other. Don't return here."

Remus opens his mouth, but closes it. He nods, once.

Go to Greyback, Sirius almost tells him. Remus' family is dead; his blood family. Incredible parents he had, lovely, loving people. But they are gone.

Remus' other family broke apart, long ago, but shattered without hope of repair when James died.

Greyback is the only family that remains to Remus. And no one should be without family.

Sirius doesn't say it, though, because Remus wouldn't take it as intended.

He doesn't say *'this world will never accept you, you will always be pushed aside'*, because Remus already knows it, far better than Sirius. If he chooses to stay here, instead of going to the pack that will welcome him…it is Remus' choice. Remus always fled from his 'bad' side, he was scared of it, forever ashamed.

How can they be friends, when Sirius leans into his worst instincts, when he was so easily tempted by Voldemort and the power in his own veins, in his name?

Remus leaves, and Sirius' heart wants to react to it, but Sirius' tells it *'I lost him long ago, already. This was just a ghost'*.

James wouldn't approve.

"Sorry, mate," Sirius whispers. "But in your last letter, you said you understand more about how life works. You said keeping Harry safe is all that matters. Family keeps him safe, nothing else. So I need to focus on that, yeah? Trust me."

James would trust him. He always trusted Sirius, unlike Remus, unlike everyone else.

James would be *beyond* pissed that Remus believed Sirius would ever betray him.

(-)

"Tell him to get married!" his mother demands of Sirius, a letter from Regulus in her hand.

He hadn't really paid attention, but he knows his grandfather and mother had shifted their attention on getting Regulus married, now that they finally made Sirius do it.

'Get married," Sirius writes on a piece of parchment. Why should he be the only one to do it, after all? *'We both know they'll get what they want, eventually, so just do it. Pick a wife, soon, otherwise I'll let grandfather pick one for you. And no, I don't care that you're at the Institute.'* His mother says that's Regulus' newest excuse. *'You'll marry in the summer, when you come home, and then you can return to your studies.'*

This way, maybe Astrid can have a friend inside the home. Surely, they'll band together, as outsiders in his crazy family, and maybe that way they have a chance against his mother.

"Tell him he must pick a British girl," his mother says, reading over Sirius' shoulder. "One foreigner is quite enough." He hears the derision in her voice.

That's his mother, all right. Weeks ago, she'd have been fine if Sirius married even a low-class pureblood from a forest in Siberia, as long as he married. But, now that it's done, she'll find something to bitch about.

Sirius ignores her. Maybe Regulus found a girl he likes in Egypt, though he doubts it. Regulus wouldn't want to wed the type of woman that is Institute educated.

Bella once wanted to go to the Institute of Runic Magic, he remembers. She wanted it since she was a little girl, and in her last year at Hogwarts, she applied behind her father's back, and got accepted before she even took her N.E.W.Ts, just based on her extraordinary O.W.Ls and an essay she sent with her application, so great that it ended up being published in some German research magazine.

Everyone lost their minds about it. His grandfathers both almost had heart attacks at the idea. Druella, not as drugged as she became once Andromeda left, fell into a depressive state that her daughter, her own flesh and blood, would think of going alone to a foreign country, to study. *'What would people say?'* she kept asking, on the verge of fainting just when speaking about it.

Sirius stays quiet, pretending to focus on the assignment his father gave him, happy he is allowed in the room. He scribbles aimlessly on his parchment, perched on the couch in the office.

His father reads Bellatrix paper, at his desk, Bella sitting on the other side, back straight.

She's home for the spring holidays, and Sirius can't wait to talk to her. He'd missed her something fierce, he hadn't seen her since Yule.

Eventually, his father finishes reading, puts aside the parchment. He turns his gaze to Bellatrix.

"Impressive," he says, with a small smile, and Bellatrix' shoulders, already straight, get straighter with pride. "I would be in awe, if only I wasn't used to you, darling. You've awed me since you could talk; by this point, I leaned to expect perfection from everything you do." He sighs. "I've also learned to expect disobedience, so I shan't say anything about you applying without our knowledge."

"It is only for three years," Bella says, pleading. "And it's in Germany, so close-"

"You will be surrounded by mostly male students. Precious few girls of your status are allowed to attend, and those from lower families that would let their daughters leave their homes to study, rarely have the means to apply and get accepted into such a prestigious program."

"I would conduct myself without reproach," Bella insists."I'm going there to study, not flirt with boys."

"I know," his father says, softly. "You always did your duty to our family, even if you whined about it."

"I always will," she begs. "This is also for our family! What family wouldn't benefit from one of their own becoming a Master in Runic Magic? I would learn so much! So few people know how to wield magic without a wand, I would be an asset!"

"You are, already," his father assures her. "You are our most precious jewel, Bella."

She melts, Sirius notices, with envy. Sirius always compliments her, too, tells her how beautiful she is, how smart, how special, yet she only laughs and pinches his cheeks. Now, she looks so happy, it makes Sirius' eye twitch.

"Say you go. You finish your studies, and I have no doubt you'd finish at the top of the class. What after?"

"I will marry," Bellatrix says. "I do know my duty, Uncle. I'm simply asking for three more years-"

"And what use will your Mastery be of, as a wife and a mother?"

"What use did you find for your Mastery in Charms?" Bella snaps. "All you do is politics and business."

Sirius stiffens. No one should talk like that to his father. He does not put up with-

His father laughs, amused.

"Perhaps I will go into research. I can read, study, perform magic, even if I am married, even if I have to take care of a Manor."

"And children? Who will take care of those, if you're with your nose in a book, or in a forest, tinkering with dangerous runes?"

"I am sure my future husband will have a house-elf, at the very least. It can also take care of the husband," she adds, sarcastic. "Just in case you marry me off to a grown baby that needs taking care of."

"I have just the man in mind for you, that would need no taking care of," his father says.

Sirius glares daggers at him. He can't believe they'll just give Bella away to some idiot.

"Oh." Bella sounds apprehensive. "Who? Father didn't tell me anything about-"

"There is nothing to tell. I'm just thinking about it. Do not pout, you know very well the ultimate choice will be yours. No one with a brain would pressure you into accepting a man you don't want. You'd end up killing him, and then we'll have a lot of bribing to do to keep you out of Azkaban."

Bella smirks, pleased. "You're thinking of Lestrange," she guesses.

Sirius used to like Rodolphus, but since the previous Yule, when he sat boldly beside Bellatrix at the festivities, and Bellatrix didn't bark at him to get lost, Sirius sort of hates him.

"I am," his father admits, and Sirius breaks his quill. "He's quite smitten. He already asked if he could spend some time at Black Manor in the summer, apparently for Rabastan's benefit,

to play with Sirius." He smiles. "So smitten, in fact, that I have no doubt he would wait for you to finish your higher studies before starting a courtship."

His father stands. "I have nothing against you attending the Institute. I trust you not to shame our family. If you can convince Cygnus, then I will give you my blessing."

"Couldn't you talk to him?" Bella asks.

"I will. I will tell him I don't think there is anything wrong with it. I do not generally find any reason for a woman of your standing to seek higher education, but then, you are one in a million." He looks at her, with a soft expression. "Amongst witches and even amongst wizards. Exceptions can be made. However, he is your father, and I will not tell him how to handle his own children."

"But you can order it, you are Head of the House-"

"I am not a dictator. I only intervene in severe situations."

To Sirius' delight, Cygnus didn't bulge, and Sirius got to enjoy Bella's presence, got to have her close to him, not in some foreign country where he couldn't visit her whenever he wanted.

He got to be there and see Bella and Rodolphus grow closer, he was sent as chaperon on their dates, and Rodolphus would say: "If you agree to marry me, you can go to the Institute, after. Your father won't be able to do shit about it."

"Everyone will mock you for letting your wife run amok, live in a dormitory with men."

"I don't give a fuck what anyone says."

"We could go together."

"I can't. I made a promise to a man that I will be here for him." Rodolphus tilts his head. "He's trying to change things. Perhaps you should meet him. He is a master of runic magic, amongst other things. Not officially, he didn't attend any stupid Institute, he's above that, but there's no area of magic he doesn't excel in. I'm sure he'd teach you whatever runic shit you want to learn. He'd be as in awe with you as the rest of us."

Bella rolls her eyes, lounges on the picnic blanket, and Rodolphus' hand moves to her hair-

"No touching!" Sirius snarls, from a little further away, where he plays with Bellatrix wand, attempting to turn leaves to stone.

They both ignore him.

"What man? That provocateur that got grandfather's knickers in a twist? They keep mumbling about him. The dark wizard, no?"

"The very same. Don't listen to Arcturus and the others. They have no idea what they're talking about."

"I hear rumours about a war starting," Bella says. "Is it that serious? No one tells me anything, I have to listen in at doors-"

"We'll talk more when the midget isn't here, ready to report back to daddy."

"Fuck you!" Sirius spits. "Your mother was a midget!"

"Sirius!" Bella throws a buttered roll at him. But when Rodolphus gets up and pushes Sirius to the ground, with ease, Bella turns on him in an instant, and Sirius laughs, because he doubts anyone else in the world would have the nerve to slap Rodolphus so hard his head moves. And she's wandless, Sirius has her wand, yet Bella shows no fear as she rages at her stupid boyfriend, who ends up promising he will never again raise his hand at Sirius, no matter what.

(-)

He must be getting better, even if a little, because at one party it finally occurs to him that he hadn't seen Evy around.

Walden comes, now and again, but Sirius hadn't seen Evy since he got out of Azkaban, and one day her absence actually registers. Most worryingly, he doesn't recall anyone mentioning her- not that he's been the most attentive man, but he thinks he would have remembered, at least something.

The next day, he goes to see her, only to be received in the parlour of the townhouse by Mr Macnair.

He's very polite, welcomes Sirius warmly, yet when he asks about Evy, Mr Macnair goes rigid.

"I don't have a daughter," he says, stiffly, with finality.

Sirius knows that tone, what it means, so he doesn't prod further, makes his escape a few awkward minutes later.

Narcissa pretends she doesn't know *who* Evy is, when Sirius asks her. It's fascinating, really. Erased, just like that. Narcissa stands firm, even when Sirius snaps and screams at her that this is ridiculous.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she insists

When Sirius asks Lucius, seated a little further away from the girls with the kids, Lucius at least doesn't pretend he has amnesia.

"I have no idea where she lives," he whispers, looking over his shoulder to make sure his crazy wife won't hear him. "If someone would know where to find her, it would be Walden."

(-)

“Sirius?” Evy stares at him, shocked.

The house-elf took him to the garden, where Evy was resting on a blanket. But now she’s standing, eyes wide, filled with surprise.

And then, her lip wobbles, and she’s in his arms so fast, she almost knocks him over.

He hasn’t been hugged by someone other than Harry in forever; he suppresses a flinch with difficulty; but she’s crying on his shoulder, so it’s unlikely she’d have noticed even if he flinched.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she says, even if the tears suggest otherwise.

Finally, he remembers how hugging goes, and he hugs her back, lets her cry for a few moments.

“I got married,” he says, when she lets him go, wiping her tears away, smearing makeup on her cheeks. “Remember when you told me I won’t escape it?” He snorts. “You were right.”

Evy attempts a reassuring smile, though it doesn’t look quite right. “She is beautiful- the pictures were beautiful. I saw them in the Prophet.”

“You should have been at the wedding,” Sirius says. “I wasn’t involved with the planning, I was a little…distracted. You should have been there, Evelyn.”

“That wouldn’t have gone over well,” Evy says. “I’m a pariah; hardly proper to have me at such a prestigious event.”

“The child is his, then.” He imagines that’s why she was disowned.

“Oh, you don’t know!” She smiles, this time more real. Even through the pain in her eyes, something very warm shines behind it. “*Children*. The charms were wrong. Well, not wrong, I do have a boy. But they failed to detect my daughter.”

“You’re shitting me!”

“Come.”

She takes his hand and leads him further away, where the house elf is looking over two babies, laid beside each other in a fancy swing.

“Morgana’s tits!” Sirius exclaims, when he stands before them. “That’s- wow.”

“Yeah.” Evy laughs, and she lifts the girl.

Sirius wondered why Evy didn't lie, why she didn't pretend the baby was Paul's, as was the plan.

But there is no way anyone that ever met a Lestrange would have believed it.

The girl is basically Rabastan. The dark green eyes, even their shape- those are Rabastan's eyes. Her lips are Rabastan's, they even quirk at the corner the same way his did.

The hair, just a tuft, is dark red.

"This is Regina." Evy kisses her cheek, puts her back in the swing. "And this is Regis."

Regis has Rabastan's lips, too, the shape of his eyes. But the colour is more like Evy's, a light brown, and his hair, while reddish, is mostly brown, too.

Apparently, Paul's parents still believe the twins are his; Regis does take after Evy, and she told them she has red heads in her family.

"They got Paul's inheritance," Evy says, some minutes later, pouring Sirius a glass of firewhsikey. "At least there's that- I can feed them and house them comfortably."

She tried to help her parents, too. To get them a house-elf, to fix up their townhouse that is in some dire need of renovation. But they want nothing to do with her.

Unlike Paul's parents, no one in magical Britain would confuse those kids for anything other than Lestranges.

"Walden still talks to me," Evy says, trying to not cry again. "But not in public, of course."

Apparently, she went into labour the night Rabastan was arrested.

"I was scared. I thought I was going to lose the baby, but that's when the Healers realised there were two of them, and apparently twins come early, usually. Though mine were earlier than normal. They said the stress must have sent me into…" she trails off for a second. "We had to spend a week in St Mungo's."

Sirius says nothing, though something twists in his heart. He can see Evy, alone at the hospital, scared. Rabastan, when he was brought in-

"You're good with kids," Evy says, when Sirius expertly lifts Regina, to occupy his hands with something.

"Yeah. Have some experience."

"Your ward, Harry?"

Sirius nods. Lucius did him a favour and leaked the information to the press, that the 'Boy-Who-Lived' is now under Sirius' protection and Guardianship.

They lapse into silence for a while; Sirius grows agitated in it, his mind keeps replaying an image of Rabastan, alone in Azkaban, perhaps worrying about Evy, not knowing what became of her, not even knowing he's a father.

"Come to Grimmauld, tomorrow. So you can meet Astrid."

"Sirius, I-"

"No." Sirius stands, goes to her, lifts her head up, his fingers on her jaw. "You're coming. And you'll come with me to Nott's birthday party next weekend."

"Sirius-"

"I am not going to let them do this to you. You're one of us."

"They'll be upset with you, they-"

"I don't give a fuck. If they know what's good for them, they'll shut up and treat you how you deserve."

Evy opens her mouth again, but he cuts over her.

"Harry can't play with just anyone, you know? All that Boy-Who-Lived shit. I don't want him around -frankly, I don't want him around anyone. I can't trust anyone, not with him. I trust Lucius, so there's his son. And I trust you, yeah? It will be good for Harry to have more little friends."

He looks at the twins.

"Well, as soon as they start speaking and walking and shit." Though Regina seems on the cups of walking already, standing on unsteady feet, her tiny fingers clasped around the edge of the table, a determined look on her face as she tries to take a step.

Rabastan's determined face. It sends a jolt of pain down Sirius' spine.

"You were always the best amongst us," Evy says, softly.

Later, Sirius asks for a meeting with his fellow former Death Eaters.

It's strange to gather like that, during the day, without their wives.

It's reminiscent of *other* gatherings. They are tense, uncomfortable, as they wait for him to speak, but they all showed up when he sent letters that he wants to see them.

Sirius goes straight to the point; he reminds them that Rabastan is paying for all their collective crimes. That Rabastan bled for them, killed for them, had their backs in battle.

"You will not mistreat his children. We won't allow those kids to grow up fatherless, shunned by a society their father gave his freedom for. If he had talked to the Aurors, every single one of us would be in Azkaban right now. Yet he hadn't. This is no way to repay him."

“She had children out of wedlock, Sirius. She is disowned-”

Sirius glares at Yaxley. “I don’t care what she did. She’s their mother, and we have a duty to those children. So, tell your wives they better fucking mind themselves around her. Tell them they should invite her over for tea, or garden viewing or whatever the fuck women do.” He glares at all of them, in turn. “Don’t upset me,” he warns them. “Really, *don’t* do it.”

No one argues further, though Lucius takes him aside after the meeting ends and tells Sirius he should break this news to Narcissa, if he thinks it’s such a good idea.

(-)

“Have you no sympathy at all?” Sirius asks.

“For a whore? No, I don’t,” Narcissa says, nose up in the air, arms crossed.

“What about the children?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Imagine if you’d have to raise Draco on your own, without Lucius. Those kids were already robbed of a father- truly, just imagine how heartbroken Draco would be without his dad.”

“A good thing I didn’t get pregnant with a man other than my husband. Perhaps if she didn’t have her husband killed, then at least the children would have a father figure-”

“She didn’t have him killed! That was Rabastan-”

“That was her. What did she imagine would happen, sleeping around with that deranged lunatic, leading him on?”

Sirius remembers that’s exactly what Bella said to Evy- well, Bella would never call Rabastan a deranged lunatic, but that was the gist of it.

Bella only said that to Evy because she loves Rabastan. Sirius was there when she tore into him for killing Paul without’s Evy’s knowledge. Bella understood Paul’s murder was Rabastan’s fault, not Evy’s.

“She’s all alone, Cissa. With twins.”

“It’s her fault! I won’t have my Draco raised around bastards.”

“They are Lestranges and Macnairs, they’re purebloods-”

“Bastards.”

Sirius looks to Lucius for help, but Lucius just shrugs.

“Give her time; sometimes she softens over time,” he advises Sirius, once Narcissa leaves in a huff.

“It’s fucking ridiculous-”

“These are our values, Sirius. Evelyn broke what is sacred to us- if she’s not punished for it, then maybe others will think it’s alright to do what she did.”

“You *killed* people,” Sirius snarls at him. “You weren’t punished! What if others think it’s alright to do what you did, huh?”

Lucius doesn’t take the bait, doesn’t let himself goaded into a fight.

He regards Sirius with his cold, unreadable eyes.

“You know what? You’re right. If Voldemort-” Lucius’s eye twitches at the name, “comes back, he probably won’t do anything to you, because you are a Malfoy, you are Abraxas’ son. But if he comes back, he’ll free Rabastan. And then you'll have to look him in the eyes and tell him you shunned his kids. Rabastan won’t give a fuck that you’re a Malfoy, so-”

“I’m not afraid of Rabastan,” Lucius says, tone neutral.

Sirius gets in his face.

“You should be. You should be afraid of someone that has nothing else to lose. You don’t understand- you can’t-” Sirius’ voice is shaking. “You can’t imagine what Azkaban does to someone. You know Rabastan from before, but you won’t know whatever comes out of there. Even I can’t imagine what that will look like, if it takes years.”

Lucius lays a hand on his shoulder. Sirius pushes him away.

“It’s not your fault,” Lucius says, softly.

“Where the fuck did that come from-”

“It’s not your fault, Sirius. I know you feel you left them behind, but it was their choice.”

Sirius can’t see Bellatrix, he *won’t* see her, even if he exchanges daily letters with Cygnus about her. He can’t make himself go there.

Sirius is empty inside, a dark, gaping wound that doesn’t heal. Sometimes it’s numb, sometimes it hurts. Yet he has to take care of Harry, he has a duty to his family. He goes to parties, goes on walks with his dog, and gets to hug Harry, keep him close to his chest, gets to feel a tiny bit of joy in all that pain and anger or nothingness that plague him.

Bella has nothing. Her beloved husband is imprisoned, and no one is fighting to get him out; the man she idolised is lost, and no one is looking for him. She would, but they’re not letting her, and Sirius can’t imagine knowing he could save those he loves yet being made powerless to do it.

He can't think of Rabastan locked up; his humour, his carefree attitude, his entire future, all getting sucked out of him by dementors.

Rodolphus, who did his very best to keep Sirius away from Voldemort, to protect them both from each other. Loyal, steady Rodolphus, who would rather suffer Azkaban than denounce Voldemort.

And Sirius can save them; he can save Voldemort, too. Yet he doesn't.

Even without Voldemort, if Sirius truly wanted it, they could manage to get the Lestranges out. They could stage a break out, somehow. He knows there are options- violent ones, political ones, there is *something* there to be done. Yet no one is doing it. He is not doing it.

He tells himself it's protecting Harry. That it's for James. Voldemort can't come back because of that. And there is truth to that, it plays a huge role in why Sirius isn't acting.

Deep down, when his mind is clear, when the numbness breaks, Sirius admits to himself that he doesn't save Voldemort because he wants Voldemort to *suffer*. Not for James, not just for James. But because he hurt Sirius so badly.

He gave his heart to Voldemort, and Voldemort stepped on it. Sirius gave him his trust, told him things he told no one before him, his deepest secrets, his most shameful desires that he never voiced even to his father. He let down his shield, he allowed himself to be vulnerable, he turned his back to Dumbledore and, to an extent, he betrayed James for Voldemort, too. He didn't allow himself to think of it in those terms back then, but deep down he always knew that siding with Voldemort is a betrayal to James, to Lily, even in his naive, idiotic scenarios in which Sirius could have saved their lives- their lives would have sucked, is the truth. And Sirius still sided with Voldemort.

He gave that man everything he had, he took him to Black Manor, into his father's office, he cried in front of him, begged him, kneeled for him, and Voldemort spat on it.

"We *all* made horrible choices," he says, looking at Lucius. "Yet here we are, and the Lestranges are -"

"I begged them to renounce him that morning. It would have worked. Rabastan and I would have claimed the Imperius- Bella could have said monstrous Rodolphus forced her, that she had no choice but to take the mark, that she's just a woman that couldn't fight against her husband. I told Rodolphus to run- there was no other way for him," Lucius lays his hand on Sirius' shoulder again. "But Bella didn't listen. And Rodolphus refused to abandon her. Rabastan chose to follow him. They went and tortured Aurors, with no caution, with no planning. They did it to themselves. Stop feeling guilty about it."

(-)

“Sirius!”

Something eases in his chest; he feared she wouldn’t recognise him anymore. After all, he still can’t recognise himself in the mirror, even if he’s looking better and better, as the days pass. His body is almost recovered, but there’s something in his eyes that’s missing, that makes Sirius stare at his reflection as if it were a stranger to him.

But Dora recognises him, and she runs to him.

She’s grown, he realises, when she hugs him.

“How is the most beautiful girl in the world?” he asks

She cries, head in his stomach, arms tight around him. “Sirius! I missed you so much!”

He runs his fingers through her hair. It’s such a unique experience to have it shift under his fingers, from brown to black, from long to short.

“I missed you, too! Move along!” he snaps at a muggle that comes close to them.

Dora withdraws, turns to look at the muggle. “It’s alright, Miss, he’s my cousin-”

But the teacher is already turning around, remembering she has others thing to do.

“Don’t bother with her.” Sirius lowers himself to her level. “Look at you! You’ve gotten taller!”

He casts a muggle repelling charm around them, so the other children and teacher in the yard would leave them alone.

She touches his face. “People are saying mean things about you, Sirius,” she whispers. “Even Daddy. I heard him talk to his friends. I didn’t like it! They say you are a bad man! I fought with them! I told them you are the best cousin in the world!”

Sirius pushes down the sorrow. He smiles. “You fought, did you? You won?”

Dora sighs. “No. They sent me to my room! I can’t wait to be big, so no one can send me to my room anymore!”

“Come here,” he says, pulling her into another hug.

She smells nice. Like innocence. Like better days.

“I really missed you, kiddo.”

She nods in his shoulder. “I missed you, too! So much!”

“Let’s go see Andy, yes?”

Dora pulls back, shakes her head. “No, no! That’s not a good idea! Mama says you’re…bad, too!”

Sirius doesn't allow himself to feel anything. He smiles. "Well, we'll see her, and she'll realise she's wrong, yeah? Everything will be fine." He kisses her forehead, stands up. "Just fine, you'll see. When did I ever lie to you, huh?"

"Never!" Dora says, but she still looks conflicted. "It's only that Mama is stubborn. I don't want her to yell at you!"

He takes her hand, walks her out of the schoolyard.

"Sirius, why are you dressed like Cygnus?"

"I'm not dressed like Cygnus, I'm dressed like a wizard," he says.

"You didn't dress like this before," she says. "And Daddy is a wizard, too, and his friends, but their robes aren't so-"

"We're different type of wizards," Sirius says.

"What do you mean?" she frowns, looks up at him. "How are you different?"

"I'm rich," he says.

"Oh." She bites her lip. "Ingrid is rich, too! She has a bigger backpack, and she has these really nice games, better than the rest of the class."

"You can have them, too," he says. "You're rich, too."

"No, I'm not!" She laughs. "We're careful with money. I have what I need, but we're careful," she repeats something she must have heard from her father. "Though now Daddy got promoted at the bank, so it's better than before-"

"I'm going to take care of you, now. You'll see. It will be different."

"Where's the bike?" Dora asks, when they're out of the school, passing by where Sirius usually parked.

I left it at Voldemort's house, it strikes Sirius. He stops walking, his chest tight.

He hadn't thought of his bike. In the same second, he realises he misses it *so much*, that he wants it so badly, but at the same time, he never wants to see it again, doesn't want to think of it, because it will remind him of Voldemort, it's parked near his cabin-

"I'm a grown man, kiddo. No more bike," he says, that sense of loss settling over him.

Will it ever end? Losing things, realising he's losing things-

How is it possible he gained so much wealth, and power, a beautiful wife, things men spend their entire life to get, and yet he only feels like he's losing more and more?

Dora frowns, looks up at him. “Grown men have bikes, too! I’ve seen loads of grown men on bikes, with beards and all! Big men!”

“Muggles,” Sirius says, pushing all these thoughts away. “I’m no muggle. I can Apparate, I have no need for a bike.”

“But it was fun!”

He starts walking again, but she doesn’t, pulling at his hand. “Sirius, are you alright?” she whispers.

“Of course I am! Come along.”

She trails after him, but she looks concerned, and he doesn’t want that.

“So, you’ve seen Cygnus while I was gone?”

She had. Twice, Cygnus said. With Andromeda there.

“I did! I begged Mama to let me see him and she relented, as a gift for Christmas, and then for my birthday! Though, Cygnus doesn’t celebrate Christmas, but he gave me a very nice Yule gift! I have the feeling Mama likes this Yule thing, better, too! I have no idea why she never told me about it, or why we don’t celebrate it-”

“Because of Ted. I’m sure he’s very attached to his Christmas nonsense.”

“I like Christmas, too! It’s nice!” Dora exclaims. “We can do both, though, can’t we?”

Once, Sirius would have said yes.

He’d been so intrigued as a kid, when he first went to Hogwarts and saw Hagrid bringing in Christmas trees. Both he and James pestered the muggleborns in Gryffindor to tell them more about Christmas, because neither would stay for the winter break to experience it.

“Here at Hogwarts they just bring in the tree, really,” the Prefect says. “It’s more in the muggle world, much more than just a tree, but I suppose that wouldn’t make sense here. It’s a celebration of Christ, hence Christmas. His birth.”

“The muggle god!” James says, excited. “I’ve heard a little about him! What’s his domain? What does he do?”

“Burn witches, I think,” Sirius intervenes, because he was taught about Christianity a little. Apparently, muggles hunted witches for Christ or something like that.

The Prefect flinches.

Remus takes them away. “Why on Earth didn’t you ask me about it?”

“Oh.” Sirius and James exchange a look. They forgot Remus is a half-blood. That’s why he’s so odd and sickly, Sirius thinks. Remus is a good lad, but he’s strange, quiet, always sick.

Must be his muggle blood.

His father always said muggles are weak.

"So, did Christ burn witches?" James asks.

"No. Those were simply muggles that hated women, Mother told me. They mostly hurt Muggle women that didn't follow the rules. It had very little to do with God, even if they used his name."

"I don't understand," James said, frowning.

"I don't either." Remus shrugs. "But that's what she said."

"So what's his power? He's the god of what?"

"Of love and forgiveness, I suppose-"

"Lame," Sirius and James declare, and they dismiss the whole thing.

"No," he answers. "We can't do both."

"Well, I want both," Dora says, as stubborn as any Black. "I'll ask Mama and Daddy to do both this year."

"Oh, you'll have a proper Yule this winter, I promise," Sirius assures her.

"If you're rich, can you take me to Romania? I want to see the dragons. I want to be a dragon handler!"

"Oh, do you now? What happened to wanting to be an Auror?"

Her face darkness. *She's a Black, alright.* And she looks so much like Bella, with the black hair she wears around Sirius, it makes his breath halt in his chest.

"They're stupid and mean! They thought you were evil, and they sent you to Azkaban! Auntie Bella, too! She was so lovely, how could she be bad?! I hate them, now! They hurt you, and Cygnus was so upset when I saw him, even if he didn't say it!"

"No one can hurt a Black," Sirius reminds her. "It was a temporary inconvenience, that's all."

She narrows her eyes. "Cygnus was hurt. I could see it in his eyes!"

Gods. Cygnus is slipping, in his old age, if even a child could guess it.

"You imagined it," Sirius goes on. "However," he adds, when she opens her mouth, determined. "It's for the best you don't want to be an Auror, yes. Dragon handlers are much better! He who tames a dragon, can tame the world," he quotes. "Or 'she', I suppose."

She grins. "Yes! I want to tame a dragon!"

It will never happen. Powerful wizards or witches can *handle* dragons, keep them captive, but a dragon will never be tamed.

If wizards, and elves before them, wouldn't have learned how to keep dragons in check, they'd have multiplied out of control, and there would be no muggles, defenceless against such beasts. Yet muggles don't even know it, have no idea with whom they share the world.

Lily once told him muggles know about dragons, but think them myths. These myths all probably started long ago, when ancient muggles knew about the wizarding world. The stories have turned into legends.

(-)

Andromeda is like a dragon herself when Sirius enters the house, Dora at his side.

Really, the way her nostrils flare, her eyes spark- all that's missing is fire coming out of her mouth.

Though he's sure whatever will come out of her mouth will be only slightly less painful than dragon fire. That is, if he lets her gain advantage.

"Mama, look!" Dora says, nervous, aware of the way Sirius and Andromeda glare at each other. "It's Sirius! I'm so happy to see him! So very *happy*!"

"Go to your room," Andromeda hisses.

"No, I-"

"Nymphadora! Go to your room!"

It's like seeing his grandmother Irma, the only woman in the world Cygnus obeyed blindly, because there's no ignoring the authority in her tone.

"Don't call me Nymphadora!" Yet Dora goes away, all the same, even if she's not quiet about it. "If you're mean to Sirius, I'll run away!" she threatens. "I'll do it! Like you ran away!"

Andromeda's eye twitches. She waits until they hear a door slamming shut, down the hallway.

"I won't put up with this," she spits at Sirius. "I had too, before, but I won't, now."

"Why did you have to, before?" Sirius asks.

"You know why!" She stalks closer, wand in hand. "But now I-"

"Because Voldemort was winning?"

“He’s gone, now,” she says, chin held up. “So-”

“So, *what*? And you’re standing far too close, darling. If you mean to curse me, you should keep a proper distance; or have you truly forgotten everything you were taught?”

“I can curse you, no problem,” she points out, the tip of her wand pressed under his jaw.

Sirius stares down at her. “Wake up, cousin. Voldemort or no Voldemort, war or no war, *this* never had anything to do with it. You think I can’t kill your husband just because we’re not at war anymore?”

The wand pushes deeper into his skin.

“I assure you, I can. I killed loads of people, and yet here I stand. Bella killed more, and yet she’s free.”

Well, not free. Cygnus has her locked inside her childhood bedroom, but still…

“You think I’d get in trouble for offing another muggleborn? You think I *care*?”

“What the fuck happened to you, Sirius?” she screams.

“I grew up,” he says, and he pushes the wand away from him. “I realised family keeps us safe. Or do you think it’s a coincidence Bella and I are free, while other Death Eaters are locked up, huh? You know why those are locked up? Because they have no family to fight for them.”

Rodolphus has no father, no uncle left. Dolohov has no family in England.

“You’re threatening to have my husband killed, and yet you stand there and tell me family keeps me safe? *He is my family*!”

“You can keep him,” Sirius says. “As long as you remember your duty to us, too. Such a small thing to ask, Andromeda- dinner, every Saturday. And, in return, you get my protection.”

“I don’t want your protection!”

“You wanted it during the war,” he reminds her. “You used Bella as a shield, during the war. You knew you were a Black, so you would be left alone. You little hypocrite! How many of Ted’s muggleborn friends are dead, huh? Along with their blood traitor spouses?”

“Too many,” she screams. “Far too many, you monster!”

“I didn’t go around killing -” He breathes in. He won’t explain himself to her. “And yet you and him are fine. Because of Bella, because of Cygnus. You used our name, you benefited from it.”

“You think I-”

“But I am not Cygnus, and I am not Bellatrix. I lead the Blacks now, and, I swear to you, I will do *whatever* it takes to get you and your daughter back into the family. Do not doubt it, cousin. Do not make me prove it to you. It costs you nothing to eat with us! It makes your daughter happy!”

“It costs me my fucking sanity! Nymphadora is a child! She’s happy now, but she won’t be soon, when she-”

“Oh, how will we make her unhappy? Let me guess- we will tell her she has to wear dresses, not trousers? That women can’t be Aurors? We’ll insist she work on her manners? Oh, but I think *you* already tell her that, Andromeda!”

She slaps him. He laughs.

“There you go! Maybe you slap her, too? You are just like us, admit it! And you’re raising her the way you were raised, too! Or at least you’re trying.” He laughs some more. “How odd- both Bellatrix and I have more modern views than you. I assure you, neither of us care if women work, or if they wear trousers.”

“That means nothing! *Dresses*- I was speaking about forced engagements and-”

“No one fucking forced you! Cygnus *asked* you! You said yes! And worry not, no one will try to engage Dora to anyone, not with her blood.”

He was sure she will slap him again, but, instead, Andromeda’s eyes go wide, and she steps back, faced awash in sudden revelation.

Oh, that’s good.

“We just want you around,” he presses his advantage. “Because we love you. And her. But, rest assured, no one will expect things of her that were expected of you. Because while she is a Black, she doesn’t have our name. If she fucks up in society, she won’t be shaming our name, yeah? If she marries a muggleborn or a blood traitor or a fucking muggle, is not like she’s gonna taint our blood, is it? It’s already tainted, don’t you see? She will not be under the pressure we were. I just want her close, Cygnus wants her close, that’s all.”

“Why?” Her fury mixes with frustration, with something close to desperation. “Why would you want me close after everything I did?”

“Because we love you,” he repeats. “You know we love you-yes, yes,” he raises a hand when she tries to speak. “I know, our love is bad and weird and whatever. But it is love. Just let us love you, let us love her. Let us care for you. We are willing to ignore your betrayal, to ignore Ted. Is it really too much to ask to suffer a dinner, once a week?”

“Why couldn’t you start with that, instead of threats?” she demands.

“Why did you pull out your wand, before I started speaking?” he asks.

“You will never threaten Ted again,” she says. “And no one will speak badly of him, at these dinners you want.”

“You have my word.”

Come on, come on! She clearly wants them back, too, or a part of her does. That’s why she accepted to see Cygnus. If she really hated him, if she really wanted nothing to do with him, then Dora could have begged for eternity, and Andromeda would have said ‘no’.

“Fine,” she spits. “But Narcissa better pull out the stick that’s lodged into her arse!”

Sirius snorts. “Narcissa? You’ll have to force it out, as if you don’t know! I can’t control Narcissa, no one can.” He smiles. “Well, you and Bella could. So, get to it, yeah?”

(-)

Narcissa is pissed. She got too accustomed being the most important woman around, ordering the others, making them follow her in anything she wanted.

There was no one that could rival her, in beauty or in class. Well, there was Bella; but Bella cared nothing for these things, and when she did get involved in social activities, she, too, followed Cissa, because Bella loved her sister, and knew these things are important to her.

Narcissa scorned Evy, and she expected all the other women would do as she does.

But Astrid doesn’t scorn Evy. And while Astrid is new, just a foreigner, she is now a Black. She’s just as beautiful, her name just as important, and while not as rich as the Malfoys, Lucius’ wealth is so ridiculously unachievable that no one is in competition with it, no one is even trying. Sirius’ wealth is impressive, worthy of envy when compared to anyone else other than a Malfoy. Perhaps only Nott and Greengrass can boast of something similar.

So when Astrid does as Sirius asks, when she goes shopping with Evy, when she invites Evy to Black Manor, along with other women- no one says no to such an invitation. They come, and they respect their host’s guests.

“She asked me if my kids are yours,” Evy warns Sirius, one day.

“What?”

Evy scrunches up her nose.“You can’t fault her for thinking it. You’re going to great lengths to protect me and the children, and they’re the only kids allowed around Harry, besides Draco. Someone made sure to inform her you and I fucked at Hogwarts. It has Narcissa’s doing all over it. She’s trying to turn Astrid against me.”

Sirius always knew that the women are far more vicious than the men. The way they go about things is insane. He’d rather take out his wand and curse someone than go through all this trouble.

“I’ll talk to her-”

“Don’t interfere, you’re not up to it, believe me.” She rolls her eyes. “Besides, Astrid is sharp; she sees through it.”

“Well, if she has to ask-”

“Oh, she didn’t ask thinking I’d tell her the truth, don’t be absurd. She’ll learn the truth from sources she trusts in, not me. She asked so she can let me know she is aware we once slept together, and to make me aware Narcissa is sabotaging me.”

Sirius blinks. “I’m getting a headache.” He rubs his temples. “Like I said, I’ll talk-”

“She won’t trust you, either, don’t be an idiot. She barely knows you- she knows me more than she knows you, at this point. I’m sure she has her ways- she seems closest with Cora- Cora is a good sort, she’ll tell her the kids aren’t yours.”

“Everyone knows they’re Rabastan’s, she must have heard that, right? *I* keep hearing about it! It’s all I hear about, sometimes!”

Evy waves it away.“Everyone knows, but no one says his name. You know how it goes. They allude to it, that I’m a whore that cheated on my husband, but they don’t go into detail. It’s not proper.”

“They do in my circle,” Sirius assures her.

“That’s because men have no subtlety. Except Lucius,” she adds. “Don’t talk to her! If you do, it would tell her I talked to you about it, which would only lend more credibility that we’re too close. Oh,” she points a finger at him. “This is the last time you’re coming to my house on your own.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“You come with Astrid, or not at all. Now, be on your way.”

(-)

His mother laughs when he complains to her. “This is why I never socialised much,” she says. “Those harpies... new generation, same behaviour.”

Sirius sighs. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. You don’t get involved.”

“I don’t want her to think those are my kids! That’s ridiculous. Can’t you talk to Narcissa, tell her to stop?”

She bites her lip. “I could. Though she’s a stubborn girl, used to getting what she wants. Hmm. Maybe I will remind her that women used to gossip about Orion and his whores, about supposed bastards-”

Sirius spits out his tea. *“What?”*

She rolls her eyes. “Orion wasn’t stupid enough to get anyone pregnant. But they liked to gossip about it, and perhaps Narcissa would remember how indignant she was on my behalf, how she hated those women. Maybe if I tell her she’s acting like them, she’ll stop.”

“Merlin, Father was -” he stops himself just in time. But it upsets him. He always knew people gossiped, but somehow he never sat down to think that his mother was expected to socialise with women that teared her apart when she wasn’t there. “Didn’t it bother him that people were talking about our family?”

“Your father was never one to care what women talked about. He probably imagined we all hold hands and sing songs or whatever.”

“No way! He grew up with *you*. I’m sure he never imagined you sing songs or hold anyone’s hand.”

She snorts. “He thought I was *unique*. That there was no other like me, that I was the only woman with a brain and independent thought and that is why I didn’t suffer the ‘airheads’. And, of course, then came the girls- he always thought Bella, Cissa and the other one were smarter, better than the rest. He probably imagined it’s because we’re Blacks.”

“Yeah,” Sirius whispers.

She smirks. “He’d have a fit if he knew you’re protecting a woman who had children out of wedlock.”

He wouldn’t, Sirius almost says, but then he realises it would be bad to remind his mother that his dad once took Mrs Brown and her daughter under his wing, a child most certainly born out of wedlock.

“Well, Evy was married,” he says, instead, and his mother laughs. “And the ‘other one’ is Andromeda. She’s coming to dinner next Saturday, so best you start remembering her name again.”

“That is sure to put Narcissa in a better mood,” his mother mutters, sarcastic. “You realise this is exactly because of Andromeda, right? This whole Evelyn nastiness.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Narcissa doesn’t like that Evy trampled over every rule and social convention, got disowned, and now gets to waltz back in as if nothing has happened, while her own disowned sister doesn’t show any signs of wanting to come back into their circles, and will have a much harder time getting accepted, even if she wanted it, because she married a muggle and has a

half-blooded daughter, not just fucked around with a pureblood she wasn't supposed to sleep with.

(-)

"Asti!" Harry toddles away, Snuffles immediately trailing after him when the door opens and Astrid walks inside. "Look! Snitch!" He proudly shows her the snitch he and Snuffles chased around the room for the last half an hour; Sirius charmed it to go slower eventually, when Harry got frustrated. "I caught it!"

Astrid smiles at him, bends to take the snitch when Harry offers it, shyly. "Thank you. You're very sweet."

Harry giggles, then turns to bury his face in Snuffles fur.

"Gonna be a heartbreaker, this kid," Sirius says. He already has James' charm, and Lily's steady, bright eyes. Something of his own as well, something sweet and innocent and bright.

"I have no doubt." Astrid comes closer, sits on the only armchair in the nursery.

"Something wrong?"

She rarely comes there; she caught on that Sirius likes to spend his days alone with Harry and Snuffles.

It's uncomplicated with them. Sirius can lie on the floor, he can play around, and everything that matters is making Harry smile, which is very easy; all Harry expects of Sirius is his presence. All Snuffles wants is to be petted.

"No." Astrid doesn't look at him. She releases the snitch, and that catches Snuffles' attention, and Harry's a few seconds after.

"Mine, mine!" Harry yells, pulling Snuffles' tail to stop him from jumping to catch it.

They watch him run around, stumble and fall occasionally. Unlike Draco, Harry doesn't mind a few falls, getting up fast, determined.

He's a really good kid. Very kind. When he plays with Draco and Draco falls, if Lucius isn't in their immediate vicinity to pick him up, Harry is the one to help him up, to offer a hand.

You'd be so proud of him, James.

"I need to see a Healer."

That snaps Sirius back to the present. He stands, goes to her. "Are you alright?"

Astrid grabs a unicorn plush toy that was lying around. Sirius knows fuck all about her, but he did catch up to some things. When she's nervous, she tends to find ways to occupy her hands. Her face betrays nothing, though.

"I'm pregnant."

It takes a few seconds to register. Sirius stares down at her, unable to process it. She keeps her eyes on Harry, while her hands twist around the toy.

He almost asks 'how', because- they only fucked *once.* Surely, this must be some kind of record.

"Are you sure?"

"I'd like to see a Healer to confirm it, but I - yes, I'm quite sure."

"Oh."

His mind blanks out. "Alright. I'll call Hartwood," he says, after a couple of seconds.

She puts the unicorn back on the floor before standing. "Thank you."

And then she's off, after stopping to give Harry a kiss on the forehead on her way out.

(-)

"She's pregnant," Hartwood confirms it, a day later, after leaving Astrid's bedroom, finding Sirius and his mum in the parlour.

Silence.

"Congratulations," Hartwood goes on, when no one says anything.

Why isn't she happy? Sirius thinks, watching his mother's blank face.

"Everything seems in order. Avoid Apparition, and the consensus is Floo Calls should be limited as well, but other than that, she should continue with her life, with no limitations."

Hartwood sighs when he's greeted with more silence. "I'll come around, every month, to check if everything is progressing as it should."

Kreacher, the only one with a huge grin on his face, sees the man out, asking him if he can cook something or the other for the new mistress and the new baby, if maybe Healers have new information, as they sometimes discover 'as centuries pass'.

"To be perfectly honest, elf, I think you have more experience with that than I do," Hartwood mutters, going up the stairs. "Same old, same old- avoid raw meat, and limit alcohol to just

wine."

Kreacher nods, excited, ears flopping around.

"Why aren't you happy?" Sirius asks, when their voices die down, drifting towards the front door. "This is what you wanted, after all. Why you nagged me into getting married."

"I am happy."

Sirius snorts. "Tell that to your face."

"I am! It's juts-" she swallows, finally looks at him. "It isn't prudent to be happy too early. Things can…happen. I'll be happier once it's born."

Right. She had many miscarriages before Sirius was born. Five or so, Sirius thinks, remembering rumours from his childhood.

"Don't say that to Astrid, yeah?"

"I'm not an idiot!" she snaps at him. "Of course I won't say anything! Gods, why do you always treat me like I'm some demon that only wants to suck joy out of people?"

They get into a screaming match. It lasts almost an hour. It feels good, normal, familiar. A constant to ground him, when the world is pulled out from under his feet.

(-)

His grandfather is happy when Sirius goes to tell him.

Sirius cannot remember the last time he saw the man smile openly. *Did I ever see him smile so unguarded?* It only lasts a second, but even after the smile is subdued, his grandfather still seems cheerful.

"What is it?"

Oh.

"I forgot to ask," Sirius admits.

His grandfather gives him a look, but he must be thrilled, indeed, because even that stern glare is lacking its bite.

"No matter, we'll find out soon. We should have dinner, as family. Call Pollux, Irma and Regulus. We should celebrate."

Regulus only just left, a couple of weeks before, back to Egypt for the new semester.

“Mum says we should wait to see if it survives,” Sirius says, examining a book his grandfather was reading before Sirius entered his living room.

“That *woman*! Gods be good, she -”

“She’s my mother,” Sirius reminds him, sternly.

His grandfather exhales, and then he calms. “I won’t let her spoil this day. We’re having dinner next week. I’ll write to Pollux right now. Tessuth! Tessuth!”

Tessuth appears after a few more seconds, rubbing her eyes. “Master called?”

“Bring me ink and paper! I must send word to Paris and Egypt!” He smiles at his old elf. *Really, what is with those smiles?*“Sirius’ wife is with child!”

“A new Black?” Tessuth’s ears twitch. “Glory to Morgana! We have been blessed! Tessuth will be making cake!”

She disappears, and his grandfather sighs, but goes to find parchment and ink on his own.

Sirius remains strangely separated from the news for the following month. His mother is acting crazy, watching over Astrid like a hawk, hovering at her side, nagging Kreacher about what food he’s giving her, nagging Astrid about ‘exertion’ if she stands too fast from the table.

“Don’t wear heels,” his mum snaps at Astrid. “Are you deaf, girl? Didn’t I tell you about that yesterday?”

A muscle goes off in Astrid’s jaw, but she forces a smile on. “My apologies,” she offers. “I’ll take them off.”

His mum is obviously the biggest stress in Astrid’s life, but Sirius doesn’t have the heart to tell her that. It seems to calm his mother to have something to do, to control.

Druella, when she’s told, runs off to perform a ritual, sacrifice something to Hecate or Diana or whoever, praying for a boy. Sirius hopes she’s only sacrificing a chicken. He almost snarks her silly rituals clearly aren’t working since she birthed three girls.

Narcissa finally gives up on her scheming and power plays, because the ‘baby comes first’, so she puts the Evy problem on pause, and is back to her civil self, talking excitedly with Astrid, taking her shopping. His mother goes with them, refusing to part with Astrid. Sirius hears Narcissa attempted to prevent her, but that it didn’t end well.

Regulus looks shocked. “Already?” he asks, when he comes home for the weekend, and Sirius takes him aside in his office. “But you’ve only been married for two months.”

“It only takes one time.”

“Once? She got pregnant on your *wedding night*? Aren’t you fertile!?” And then, whispering. “Did you ever knock someone up before?”

“No. Even I am not that reckless.”

Maybe that’s why Sirius is…mildly uncomfortable. He lived with stress since he became sexually active, because the prospect of getting someone pregnant was so disastrous, he was paranoid about preventing it.

Apparently, that well-honed horror didn’t get the notice that it’s fine in this case. Expected. Something to be celebrated instead of death or disownment, in case it had happened before.

Out of nowhere, he remembers casting the contraceptive charm when he first had sex with Voldemort-

He feels little these days, but that memory is like a knife to the heart, painful, sharp, so intense he almost doubles over.

And once he thinks of him, something he tries so hard not to do, he becomes acutely aware of the body under the house.

He can see him, with his eyes closed, laid over the runes, his wand on his chest, like Sirius arranged it.

He can’t breathe, so he hurries to his room; he shakes so badly he can’t remember which potion is supposed to calm him, from the ones he keeps there for ‘emergencies’, so he takes five different ones. He chases them down with a couple glasses of firewhsikey, just to be sure, before he collapses into his bed.

He wakes up calm.

(-)

Bella is a little too calm. She just stares into space these days, Sirius was told, up in her old childhood bedroom.

As he enters, her eyes flicker to him, briefly, before she moves them to the window again. She’s perched on the windowsill, knees to her chest, in a nightgown, even if it’s the middle of the day.

She’s still too skinny. Sirius has recovered better- he’s not yet how he was before, but his body is slowly getting stronger.

Bella is as white as the wallpaper; in her equally white nightgown, and what with her weighting nothing, it seems as if she’ll just dissolve under his eyes if he blinks too fast.

It is painful; it’s why he doesn’t want to see her. He can stand the rest, he can try at least, but Bella-

There's too much there. Her last betrayal; her love for Voldemort. Azkaban. No one else has that in common with him.

His guilt at taking her out of Azkaban, only to imprison her in a different cell.

The Wizengamot agreed to offer her clemency. She may remain free, but she is not allowed a wand, nor is she allowed to roam in public spaces. Cygnus was given complete power over her vault, her Manor, and her very being.

Sirius doesn't read newspapers, but Lucius said enough stories were spun, carefully constructed, released to the press, and many people actually believe Bella was simply controlled by her husband, that her mind wasn't well when she made those awful decisions.

Everyone remembers Bella Black, the most beautiful debutant their world has ever seen. Everyone remembers Bellatrix Lestrange, the most beautiful woman their world has ever seen. It's hard to accept a woman of such beauty, such elegance, with her radiant smile, can be a monster. It's easier to blame it on Rodolphus and on Voldemort.

Sirius approaches her slowly.

They were always soulmates, so when he looks at Bella, sickly, dead eyed, hugging her knees to her chest, Sirius sees himself. That's how he feels inside.

He sits beside her, pulls out his fags. When he tries to open the window, he can't. It remains firmly shut, even when he uses his wand.

"Father worries I'll throw myself out of it," Bella says. Her voice is a ghost of its former self. As diminished as the rest of her. Just as Sirius' heart breaks even more, just as he thinks to run back home and take another potion, she snorts.

For a moment, he can see her again, the *real* her.

"Yet apparently I am the irrational one," she goes on. "I'm the most magically gifted witch to walk the earth. Even if I jump, at worst I'd break an ankle." She sighs. "Silly Daddy."

Cygnus is not so silly. Her left arm, thin, so fucking thin, veins and tendons and bones visible under translucent skin, is covered in bandages at the wrist and above.

"What happened there?" he asks.

She doesn't look at him, yet she somehow guesses what he's asking about. She shrugs. "I can't remember. I woke up and there was blood everywhere. I think I scratched it too hard. I wanted to feel it again."

It makes his heart hurt, his brain hurt, every inch of him in agony. It makes him feel *it*, there on his left arm, almost invisible now, yet under his skin the magic dormant, but not gone.

"Astrid is pregnant," Sirius blurts out, because he can't-

He can't think about what she said, he doesn't want to speak of it.

“Who is Astrid?”

“My wife.”

Finally, Bella takes her eyes off the window, turns them to him. She frowns. “You got married?”

He shrugs.

She takes his cigarette from between his fingers. She’s done it so many times, throwing them away, squashing them between her heels.

Bella hated smoking.

This time, she takes it to her lips, and she inhales. He knows it’s the first time she ever tried it, but Bella- oh, his Bella does everything right.

There’s no cough, no grimace. Bella masters smoking on her first try, like she mastered everything else.

“Astrid who?” Smoke comes out with the words, and she watches it, seemingly fascinated, lifting her other hand to try to catch it.

“Kristiansen. From the North -”

“I know who they are. Or do you think me crazy, too?” Just like that, her eyes turn as sharp as razors, clear and cutting.

“I think they drug you enough to put down a herd of abraxans.”

They sit in silence for a while, passing the cigarette between them.

Just like when they were young; when Sirius was thirteen, and she was twenty, about to get married, and they’d sit either on the roof at Grimmauld, or in her room, whispering, so they won’t get caught, and Bella would let him drink firewhiskey from a flask she hid under her elaborate skirts. Sirius can almost see it; goblin made silver, with the Lestrange house crest displayed on it. “R.L.” inscribed in the corner.

They were young, and while Sirius was suffering with the impending loss, her dreaded wedding- he had no idea what suffering was, did he?

“Is she pretty?”

“Yes.” Sirius leans back, supports his head on the window. He closes his eyes. “She looks a bit like you.”

“Well,” she says, after a few seconds. “You always wanted to marry me.”

“I begged Father to keep you for me, but he said you’d make my life hell,” Sirius whispers. “That I’ll never make you happy, because women like you don’t want to be happy. And

you'll make me miserable, in turn. He said he doesn't want me to have a war zone instead of a home."

She laughs, a broken sound.

"As if your house wasn't already a war zone. You grew up in the war between Orion and Walburga."

"Astrid is nothing like you," he goes on. "She just looks a little like you, but she's…"

"Boring," Bella finishes for him. "Proper."

"I suppose. I don't really know. We don't talk much."

"Busy fucking, apparently. Boy or girl?"

"I don't know yet."

"I hope it's a boy."

Sirius opens his eyes, turns his head a bit, to take her in. She's back to staring out the window. "Really? *You*, wishing for a boy? What exactly are they giving you?"

"You've turned into Orion," she says, simply. "You shouldn't have daughters. No girl should grow up in this family."

(-)

It is, in fact, a boy, Hartwood informs them, when he next arrives to check on Astrid.

She's starting to show, too, Sirius notices, *horrified.* When she lies down, her robe falling down around her, Sirius can see -

It's when the dam finally breaks, and emotions assault Sirius out of nowhere. It becomes real; not just a strange concept, an it, a possibility.

It becomes a human being. A child. A boy. A Black, that will never meet Orion Black, and it is a tragedy.

Astrid looks proud when the Healer gives them the news; she looks at Sirius, expectantly, and Sirius almost tells her 'good job'.

He needs to remind himself it's not her fault, none of this is her fault; that she's lonely, trapped with a crazy family, in a foreign country, with a brand new human developing inside her.

A boy, like she was told she needs to provide for her husband.

No one ever prepared her for a husband that feels grief when told he'll have a son; no one prepared her for a husband that mourns for a man buried under their house.

Sirius already bought her jewellery when they first learned she was pregnant; well, Lucius bought her jewellery, and told Sirius to give it to her.

But he knows a boy requires extra gratitude. He'll have to ask Lucius what to give her for that.

His grandfather is in heaven when he learns, radiating joy. It's creepy. Cygnus smiles. Druella hugs Sirius. Regulus sends gifts for Astrid from Egypt.

His mother is still reserved, refusing to get attached until she can hold a living, breathing, healthy child.

Sirius retreats in the nursery with Harry, barely ever comes out.

You like Harry. See, it's good. You'll like him, too, surely.

But Harry is not a Black. Harry is James' son.

"You're going to have a- well, a sort of brother," Sirius tells him, as Astrid's stomach becomes bigger every time he sees her. At breakfast, *briefly.* Sirius avoids her like the plague. "We'll have a baby around, soon. Like Draco, but smaller. He'll live with us."

"Where is he?" Harry asks, looking around.

"In Astrid's belly, for now."

"Oh, wow." Harry stares up at him with those eyes of his. Lately, Sirius sees them as Harry's eyes. Every day, they become solely Harry's, no longer Lily's.

Will I look at his face, one day, and fail to see James? Sirius thinks, desperate. Will the day come when Harry's hair, Harry's smile, will be just Harry? Will James die again, slowly, over time, as Harry grows up?

Except the scar- the scar…Sirius doesn't think that will ever be Harry's.

No, that's Voldemort's. That will always be Voldemort's. Kreacher and his mother, or whoever cuts Harry's hair, they make sure the scar is hidden, at all times. Do they know that every time Sirius sees it, it fills him with rage, with maddening fury, and obliterating grief? With longing and with hate?

"Was I in Asti's belly?" Harry asks, curious.

"No. You were in Lily's belly. Lily, your mother."

"Ah. Where is she?"

Sirius tells Harry about James and Lily often. Sometimes, he can't speak of them, but most of the times, he makes an effort.

"She's gone," he says, what he says every time Harry inevitably asks where these people he hears so much about are.

Harry doesn't care. He doesn't understand what he lost, what he was robbed off.

Sirius reaches out, gently moves the hair from his forehead.

He's a masochist. He can't help it. He stopped himself, before, but the realisation of impending fatherhood destroyed the wall that was keeping his self destructive behaviour at bay.

"Does it hurt?" he asks Harry, touching the scar gently.

It doesn't. While Sirius doesn't look at it, the Healer does, every time he sees Harry, and Hartwood assures Sirius the scar isn't bothering Harry at all, that it's not a danger, just an 'odd scar'.

"What?" Harry asks, smiling at him.

"Your scar- your forehead. Here. Does it hurt?"

"Nothing hurts. My knee, but only a little." Harry points to his knee, where the horn of a unicorn toy was stuck a few minutes before.

Sirius can swear he feels Voldemort's magic in the scar; he must be going insane, but he feels it.

That night, after he puts Harry to bed, Sirius can't handle existing. It's too hard. Living seems impossible, like it seemed when he first found James and Voldemort dead, in the span of minutes. He didn't want to exist anymore, so he took Voldemort's wand, and he'd have been *free,* if not for Harry crying.

He hadn't thought of that since then, he did his best not to think of it, because he is not a coward. That's a coward's way out.

Mostly, he didn't think of it because if he does it, and then he meets his Father in the afterlife, the man would hate him for it.

He can't hurt his mother, either. It would destroy her. He can't leave Harry alone on this earth.

But living is hard, breathing is the hardest thing he ever had to do.

And now, with Astrid and the baby inside her…a baby that, once born…

Sirius will never be able to leave him. Sirius will never be able to ignore Astrid now.

In the deepest parts of his mind, that only come out in his dreams, especially when he drank enough, Sirius could childishly imagine a future where Voldemort was back, where he understood Harry means him no harm. He'd apologise, he'd admit he fucked up. He'd try, hard, to make it right, and it would take years, but, eventually, Sirius had the option to forgive him, in the right circumstances. Voldemort would repent, he'd have been punished, and Sirius had the option to forgive him.

It was James that was the obstacle in those hazy dreams. James' memory.

Astrid was never part of those dreams, never an obstacle.

But now, Astrid becomes real, frighteningly so. The Black she carries inside her, a piece of Sirius, thus a piece of his own father.

The baby is real, in a way James will never be real again.

There is no moving past the baby.

Everything will end when it is born.

Sirius will no longer be Sirius; he will be someone's father, he will be responsible for raising the future Head of their family. And he has to do it right.

He can't fuck up, once the child is there. This won't just be his son, but the legacy of Orion Black, the legacy of the first Sirius Black that crawled out of a forest to establish a dynasty. Sirius really can't fuck it all up.

It doesn't feel fair.

There's no time to heal, to put himself back together, to figure out what he wants, what would make life worth living again.

(-)

The first night he doesn't take Dreamless potion, nor his calming potion, he wakes with a start in the middle of the night.

Whiskers. He forgot about Whisker. How could he have forgotten? He promised Lily he'll take care of her.

He feels so guilty he forgot about her, yet another way to fail Lily, that he doesn't stop to ponder he most likely won't find Whiskers, a year later. He also doesn't stop to consider what he's doing, when he Apparates.

So the house takes him by surprise.

He didn't think. He expected to find the Potter house as he knew it, beautiful, cozy, welcoming. Instead, he's confronted with the image from that Halloween night.

Perhaps he's in a nightmare; he's had this nightmare many times in Azkaban. Walking up to the house, knowing he shouldn't go in, yet entering either way, finding James-

Sirius shakes his head.

"Whiskers," he calls, and his voice comes out high, shaky.

He advances, slowly, and as he walks, it's even worse than that night. Because the garden is dead, untouched, weeds wild around the house. Signs of decay, of time passing, leaving James behind.

I missed the funeral, it occurs to him. *Fuck.*

He never once considered James is buried somewhere. Cold earth pressing on his body, wet and heavy. Worms, and-

Sirius shakes his head, desperately. *James is not trapped under the earth.* Maybe his body, but James is someplace else, someplace self, and warm and with no burdens.

"Whiskers," he calls out again, focusing on that.

He needs to find her. He promised Lily; it's all she wanted, for Sirius to take care of Harry and the cat.

And Sirius fucked up, while her body was still warm. He abandoned Harry and Whiskers and left with Voldemort's body-

He makes his way into the house, preparing for pain, but as soon as he enters and his eyes turn on their own to the stairs-

James isn't there.

Nothing is there; nothing familiar to stab him in the heart. Everything is gone. Furniture, pictures- all gone.

There are dead flowers all over the floor, and Sirius imagines people came to pay their respects. Many people, probably.

Gods, Lily would have hated it, strangers invading her home, her privacy.

But James- James enjoyed being adored.

What if the cat died that night, too? When the roof caved in above Harry's room?

Sirius can't make himself go upstairs; *no way.* That's where he found- no, he can't go upstairs.

He turns into Padfoot, more so to dull his pain and agitation, an instinct by now, to turn into Padfoot when he can't handle life anymore.

Yet once he's Padfoot, he catches a familiar scent, one he recognises from long ago-

He barks. *Whiskers.* Heart racing, Sirius noses around, determined, following the scent outside, down the garden, over the fence, until it grows stronger.

It leads him to Bagshot's house.

Sirius barks, whines outside the window, the moon bright above him.

And there she is. Whiskers appears on the other side of the glass, and something calms inside Sirius.

He has half a mind to break into the house and take the cat with him.

He doesn't. Whiskers is fine where she is. Harry doesn't need her. Lily would probably rather Bathilda care for her, anyway. Besides, Snuffles is not as friendly with cats as Padfoot.

It wasn't about Whiskers, anyway, he knows. The guilt he felt- feels- it has *nothing* to do with Whiskers.

He barks one last time, and runs away when he hears movement inside the house, probably the old woman waking up because of the noise.

He turns into a man when he puts enough distance between himself and Bagshot, and he Apparates away again.

In a way, it's far worse than seeing what remains of James' house.

The wards are still active and potent around the cabin. He never doubted Voldemort is alive, even if his body is in Grimmauld, but if he had, the wards are proof enough that he lives.

Such a powerful wizard, that even as a wraith, the charms and curses he cast when he had a body still stay true and strong.

"I wanted to teach," he says, and Sirius bursts out laughing. Voldemort rolls his eyes, attempting to look annoyed, but there's a small smile on his lips. "I knew it would amuse you."

He asked Voldemort if he ever wanted a career, a normal one, not dark lord, nor terrorist. He asked how on earth- why- he ended up at Borgin and Burkes.

"Dippet said I was too young, when I first tried it, when I finished my seventh year."

"You were."

"Hogwarts was the only home I knew. I wanted to stay there."

There's nothing funny about that, and it sobers Sirius up.

"I tried again, when I returned from my travels, but Dumbledore was made Headmaster by then."

Sirius stares at him.

"You mean to tell me you went to Hogwarts, as a dark lord, and asked Dumbledore for a teaching position?"

Really, the nerve on him!

Voldemort smirks. "I knew he wouldn't give it to me. I had other business there. I simply needed a reason to get inside Hogwarts."

"What business?"

"Never you mind."

"When was this?" Sirius asks.

"You'd have been in the middle of your first year of schooling."

"You could have been my teacher!" Sirius teases him.

Gods, how would that have been?

Horrible, and great, all at once.

On one hand, to learn magic from Voldemort, since eleven- that would have been something. On the other, Sirius is certain that if he'd have been Voldemort's student, growing up under his eyes, he wouldn't have fucked Sirius, ever.

Thank Merlin for Dumbledore, Sirius thinks. "Defence?" He throws a guess.

"Indeed."

"We had the worst teachers ever, changing every year. No wonder people are so useless at Defence, that no now knows how to produce a Patronus or deal with a Boggart. There was this rumour the position was cursed-"

"Oh, it is." Voldemort looks so proud of himself. "I cursed it when Dumbledore denied me. I knew he would, I didn't really want the job, but I wanted him to understand I was no longer the boy he knew- I wanted him to realise that no one says 'no' to Lord Voldemort without repercussions."

"You're joking!? You cursed it? You're the reason everyone in my generation is incompetent at Defence?"

"I did curse it, but that doesn't make it my fault students don't learn on their own. I assure you, Merrythought certainly didn't teach me about the dark arts or how to defend against them. I took it upon myself, ever since I was twelve."

"I can't believe you cursed it," Sirius says, laughing again. It's so petty, it's downright hilarious.

It's also scary, how powerful Voldemort is, to have done that right under Dumbledore's nose; a curse that even mighty Albus Dumbledore hadn't been able to break, ever since.

Sirius thinks that curse holds true, even now. That even if Dumbledore wouldn't have known about the Horcrux, he'd still have understood Voldemort is still alive, because the position remains cursed.

The wards let him pass, and it's-

Voldemort, paranoid Voldemort, that once melted into despair because a tiny house-elf entered his house, tore the entire thing down and rebuilt it, to make sure no one ever enters his home without his permission, needing to feel safe within those walls- he never withdrew Sirius' permission to come whenever he pleases, even after Sirius left him.

It's beyond painful.

Seeing his bike parked next to the torture barn is also painful. It does not look like it's been exposed to the elements for over a year, especially with how harsh the winters get so far up north. It looks shiny, clean, and that means it's protected too.

Why do you do this to yourself?

Sirius doesn't know, but he keeps walking, and the door opens for him.

It's like coming home; like Grimmauld, in a way, but different, because there's no torment he suffered inside this place, no pain, no ancient portraits of his formidable ancestors, no crazy elves, no screaming mother.

It's dusty. The window is cracked in the living, and the wood under it is swollen, probably from rain and snow.

Sirius *needs* to fix it, remembers how much Voldemort cared for his home, but he doesn't know how to fix floors.

On the desk, there's an empty glass, a pack of Sirius' cigarettes, an ashtray, and a sheet of parchment.

Sirius takes it, and he's met with his own handwriting. One of the songs he wrote.

An image of Voldemort sitting there, smoking, reading those silly lyrics slams into his mind.

Sirius sits on the floor, back against the shelves, knees to his chest, head between his legs, struggling to breathe.

How could he? How could he sit here, smoking, reading my songs for him, and then go ahead and rip me apart?

Sirius can't comprehend.

You were a pet for him, his father said, yet…even if Voldemort saw him as a pet, there was fondness there, there was *something*. Sirius knows there was. Otherwise his songs wouldn't be there on the desk, the last thing Voldemort read before he left, not to return again.

How can one hurt, so deeply and irrevocably, someone they even remotely care about? Not in anger, not during a split second decision, but premeditated, thought through, fully aware.

Voldemort understood feelings, understood and felt enough to protect Sirius from many things, to speak gently to him, to do small gestures, just to make Sirius smile.

It's not a matter of him not understanding, not feeling- Sirius knows him, in a way no one else does.

Not his father, not Lucius, not Dumbledore- not anyone.

He's been inside Voldemort, in more ways than one.

He wouldn't have hurt Sirius this horribly, fully understanding how destroyed it would leave him, if he didn't truly believe his life was in danger.

Voldemort has the full range of emotions of any other man; his intelligence is unparalleled. It's not that he's a monster from some story, with no heart, with no brain.

No, the problem was fear.

He was afraid.

Voldemort is a coward.

It's just so unbelievable, that a man of Voldemort's power, of his accomplishments, an imposing, confident wizard, the fiercest dark lord to have ever lived, the man that started a war….a *coward*.

He stands, eventually, when the sun is starting to rise. Because he's a masochist, he goes to the bedroom.

He finds his clothes in the dresser, his robes hanging neatly beside Voldemort's, even some of his muggle clothes, a few of his leather jackets-

All clean, and only then Sirius realises that for the time they lived together, his clothes were always clean. Because he grew up with elves, Sirius didn't even question it when he found them in the dresser, washed, never wondered how exactly they got there. He never had to worry about these things, he never had to worry about anything with Voldemort.

He wants to crawl into the bed, but a part of him fears that if he does it, he will never get up again.

He cries all the way out of the house, out of the wards. He's still crying when he Apparates back to Grimmauld.

He doesn't want to be there. He doesn't want to have breakfast with his family, he doesn't want a wife, a child, he doesn't want to lead House Black, doesn't want anything.

He doesn't want to live.

You are not a coward, he tries to tell himself. *You were surrounded by cowards, but you aren't one. You can't do this to your mother, to Harry. You need to move on.*

Yet he doesn't feel like he can. He misses Voldemort, he wants him, and it's so hard being in Grimmauld again, after the cabin. It's so hard to breathe, when he knows Voldemort isn't.

He goes to the office, intending to grab one of his emergency potions.

Instead, when he enters, he goes to the desk, opens the drawer.

He puts on the ring.

It reacts to him, strongly. Sirius feels it. He always could, but never like this.

He sits, knees weak, closes his eyes, rests his head on the high backseat.

With his thumb, he touches the stone, as he used to do whenever he was stressed or angry, or afraid. When he missed Voldemort, but he wasn't close by.

The ring always calmed him. It calms him now.

By the time Kreacher comes to inform him breakfast is ready, Sirius has long stopped crying.

(-)

His mother throws an ugly fit when she sees the ring. Very ugly.

His grandfather's disapproval is immense, but Sirius tells him to mind his own fucking business.

Sirius gave them an heir, he is doing his duty, so he can have a fucking ring.

Lucius only says 'you shouldn't be wearing it', and leaves it at that.

He finds comfort every time he runs his other fingers over it. Like in the past, it calms him to know it's there.

He doesn't need to run to his room and get an emergency potion, whenever he tries to tell Harry about James, to keep him alive in his son, as best he can, to honour him, but Harry asks 'who is James? I forgot.'

He starts sleeping better. The nightmares dissolve, kept at bay, and there's nothing, just rest, and occasional glimpses of a run-down apartment.

He isn't bothered by crowds anymore, either. For the first time, he goes to Diagon Alley, on his own, and the way people stare at him, whisper about him, keep their distance from him- it doesn't bother him.

Harry's scar doesn't make his chest hurt anymore. In fact, Sirius' fingers often find their way to it when he watches Harry sleep, or when he carries Harry back from the park, when Harry is too tired to walk on his own.

"You were right," he tells Tessuth, one day, when he visits his grandfather. "I didn't need the potions, after all."

Tessuth watches him carefully. "Master needs no potion," she agrees. "But Master isn't getting better. Master is getting worse."

He dismisses her. "I feel much better."

Sirius isn't even bothered by Astrid's belly. He isn't afraid anymore. It's just a child, really. He can handle a child.

He functions better, when not plagued by nightmares anymore, when every intense feeling he gets melts away as soon as it forms. It's as if the ring bears those in his stead, like he's pouring all his grief and his anger into it, into a safe container.

(-)

Regulus marries Isadora Selwyn in May.

The Northerners are visiting, since Astrid is expected to give birth at any time. Sirius wonders if it will happen during the ceremony.

Her advanced pregnancy offers Sirius the greatest excuse not to dance or party or socialise, siting with Astrid further away from the rest, and retiring early, as soon as he watches stoned faced Regulus make his oaths, and offers his well-wishes.

The bride looks happy. At least there's that. Regulus looks…well, like Regulus. Handsome, dignified, arrogant.

"How about we Apparate?" Sirius asks Astrid, as they make their way to Black Mannor, slowly, because she has to stop every other step.

“If your mother finds out…” she says, out of breath.

“She won’t. And if she does, tell her to take it up with me. Is she bothering you?”

He knows his mother is annoying Astrid, but so far no one complained to him about it. Still, he feels obligated to ask, now that it came up.

“No,” she lies. “She’s just…worried about the baby. It’s sweet, really, but a little..uhm… overbearing.”

They make it to Grimmauld with no issues; both he and Astrid scoffed at the advice not to Apparate or take the Floo.

This is a Black child, Sirius thinks. *Blacks aren’t fragile.*

He imagines Astrid thinks the child has her own blood, that carries the same arrogance and pride as the Blacks do.

When they reach the stairs, she only makes it up the first flight, and then she grips the railing and shakes her head in defeat.

Sirius carries her the rest of the way, and he initially takes her to the room he thought was hers, but turns out it’s another one. Once she’s safely seated in an armchair, he calls Kreacher to help her out of her complicated robes.

It’s only when he gets back to his own bedroom that he realises how much he recovered; or at least his body recovered; a year ago he could barely carry himself up the stairs, but carrying Astrid required little effort.

He avoided looking too closely in the mirror since his release, but he faces it that night, fully, and -

He looks almost like he remembers. Like himself.

Somehow, this turns out to be more jarring than his previous emaciated, gaunt visage.

It’s the discrepancy, he imagines. He looks like Sirius Black, but inside-

Inside, he’s still whatever tortured creature survived that Halloween night and then Azkaban.

(-)

The books claim Horcruxes have no autonomy, no sense of self, that their only function is to safeguard a part of the caster. It is the complicated enchantments that make it indestructible,

and the piece of magic, of soul, trapped inside it is what powers the spells placed on the object.

Yet when Sirius sits in front of Dumbledore, in the same old office, he wonders if the fear he feels it's just his own.

Dumbledore regards him with his inscrutable, all knowing gaze.

"I want James' cloak," Sirius says. "It's Harry's. He should have it."

He just knows Dumbledore has it. Dumbledore, who looked at the ring before he looked as Sirius' face, when Sirius entered.

"It is," he agrees. "I would have given it back when he was old enough to appreciate it."

"I'll keep it safe for him."

Dumbledore raises his wand, and a package flies out from the adjacent chamber.

Sirius didn't think he'd give it up so *easily.*

He's aware the Deathly Hallows are in a room, together, all three of them, for the first time in- probably since they were made.

His eyes trail over the Elder Wand, because of course Dumbledore would own it. Who else? Everything goes back to Dumbledore.

Sirius tried to follow its trace through history books, but the trail disappeared entirely in the eighteen century. So, he asked his grandfather, who recognised the Stone at a glance.

"In certain circles, it was rumoured Grindelwald got his hands on it," he says. "I didn't give too much credence to those rumours. Not until Dumbledore defeated him and then he took and used his wand. It is rare for a wizard to change his wand, unless lost or damaged. Dumbledore's original wand wasn't damaged in the duel; and yet he chose to trade his own, for Grindelwald's. Make of that what you will."

Sirius takes the package, hastily, reassuring himself Dumbledore wouldn't murder him on the spot, take his ring, and reunite the Hallows.

Dumbledore is not a killer.

He wants me dead, the echo of a voice whispers inside his head. And that voice, Sirius is certain, does not belong to him.

Dumbledore doesn't ask how Sirius knew he had the cloak. However, he gestures to Sirius' left hand.

"May I ask where you got that ring?"

Sirius meets his gaze.

“It was a gift. From Voldemort.”

Voldemort did say Dumbledore knew he wore it at school, that Dumbledore would stare at it.

“I have a hard time imagining him as the gifting type; Voldemort was always very protective of his possession, especially a ring he carried around for forty years.”

Sirius laughs. “What, you think I stole it off his corpse?"

Dumbledore doesn’t answer, because even his great mind fails to find a suitable explanation, one that would satisfy his own bias. He knows Sirius wouldn’t rob corpses, yet he also thinks he knows Voldemort wouldn’t give away something he treasured so much.

Does he think Voldemort knew it was the Resurrection Stone?

“He gave it to me,” Sirius repeats. He leans back into his chair. “Do you not know what it means when a man gives away his family ring to another man?”

For a second, nothing changes on Dumbledore’s face, as if he hadn’t heard, or as if his brain cannot process the information. Sirius counts it as a victory. He doubts there were many occasions in the man’s very long life where he was stumped by something.

“What?” Phineas Nigellus sputters in the silence, outraged.

And then everything shifts. Dumbledore’s eyes widen with shock, at first, he physically *flinches*- another victory. Who else would have ever made Dumbledore flinch?

But the sense of victory fades away when Dumbledore’s eyes soften *terribly*, and there’s no more suspicion when they take Sirius in, no more harshness in them.

“Oh, Sirius,” he says, and he sounds devastated.

Many people have regretful, pitiful expressions when looking at Sirius these days. His mother is the most obvious, but the rest of his family, Lucius- they all feel sorry for Sirius.

And yet…Dumbledore looks as if he *truly* understands what Sirius feels, what grief he’s carrying around with him.

It’s the first time Dumbledore is unguarded, in all the years they’ve known each other, and Sirius see his own heartbreak reflected in that old face.

To see compassion there, after everything Sirius did…

He does not deserve compassion, not from Dumbledore.

It’s impossible to bear. So Sirius breaks eye contact, looks away and shrugs, as nonchalant as he is able. Not that he’s fooling anyone, but what else can he do? Break down?

“I didn’t imagine,” Dumbledore says, and even his voice is soft. “I would have never imagined he’d resort to-”

“I told you,” Sirius speaks past the knot in his throat. “That night, when you asked me to kill Rodolphus- I told you I was sleeping with Voldemort but you didn’t believe me.”

Phineas Nigellus goes on a tirade against depravity- well, he doesn’t go far into it, before Dumbledore silences him, with a wave his wand.

“You didn’t believe me, because you don’t see him as human anymore. You think him so monstrous that you can’t even accept he is a man, with all of it entails. You looked at him and only saw evil.”

The silence is so heavy, Sirius almost wishes Phineas would still be screaming at him.

Being called a disgrace is better than Dumbledore’s pity.

“He is evil.” It’s a soft whisper; it raises the hairs on Sirius’ neck. “More evil than I understood, even. I never thought he’d fallen so low as to resort to such measures to have you on his side.”

Sirius struggles with the motives behind Voldemort’s actions.

Sometimes, he does think he meant nothing to Voldemort, just a pissing contest with Dumbledore, just that need to win, to steal Sirius from under his nemesis nose.

Yet, even after everything, Sirius can’t make himself believe it. Maybe he’s stupid, maybe, impossibly, he’s still naive, but he thinks Voldemort truly wanted Sirius, and not to spite Dumbledore, not as a political tool, but simply wanted Sirius, as himself.

All those nights, those meals, the songs- no, it couldn’t have been fake. Not all of it. Not most of it.

“You were right,” Sirius says, still not looking at Dumbledore. “When you said he won’t keep the promises he made. That I will regret it. You were right, as always.” And because he is who he is, a little shit that hurts those that poke at his wounds- “Perhaps you knew from your own experiences with Grindelwald, no? Funny, that. Here we sit, the two men daft enough to fuck dark lords. Maybe we’ll have a laugh about it in the future.”

He’s really throwing Dumbledore through a loop. When Sirius glances at him, that insufferable compassion, that unbearable kindness, is gone, replaced by shock once more. “How-”

“Voldemort told me,” Sirius lies, because he’s too ashamed to admit he was the one that had fallen so low as to use information of that nature, steal away old love letters and bring them to Voldemort, to be used against Dumbledore. Even Voldemort refused to consider it. “He could have destroyed you with that,” Sirius says. “He had the letters, he had a picture with the two of you. But he didn’t use them. He *respected* you,” Sirius says, still jealous, still hurt Voldemort considered Dumbledore to be a man far above all other men, including Sirius. “He was hurt you never respected him back, that no matter what he did, in your eyes, he will forever remain Tom, the no-good, unwanted, orphaned boy.”

“He said that?” Incredulity colours Dumbledore’s every word.

“Of course he didn’t say it,” Sirius barks at him. “But it was hard to miss.”

Dumbledore blinks, opens his mouth, closes it again.

“He told me you threatened him, set his clothes on fire when you delivered his Hogwarts letter. What the fuck were you thinking? He was a kid! Why didn’t you help him?”

If someone- anyone- would have helped Tom Riddle…

“I-” Dumbledore is clearly taken aback. Gods, if only Voldemort could see it. He would be the jealous one, to witness Sirius managing to throw Dumbledore off this badly, when Voldemort never accomplished it. “While that is somewhat factual, Sirius, he apparently presented in such a way- I didn’t set his clothes on fire. Far from it. I cast fake flames on his dresser because it contained stolen trinkets that did not belong to him.”

“You told him not to use his magic to steal, to bully, to hurt, and then you used your fucking magic to threaten him? Can’t you see how fucked up that is? *You*? The man that gives everyone a second and third and a thousand chances? But you had none for an orphaned boy? Do you have any idea what he’s been through? What horrors he’d witnessed as a little kid?”

Shut up! Sirius bites his lip, to stop himself from saying more, but it’s hard. His anger, while not sudden, always there, simmering under his skin, burns white-hot now.

“Those were hard times,” Dumbledore says, slowly. “The Great Depression, as the muggles call it, left no parts of Europe untouched, not even the magical side. For you, it would seem quite horrible, but, back then, most everyone was having a difficult time. Voldemort had a roof over his head, lived in a clean building, with a no nonsense Matron that seemed efficient, keeping everything orderly.”

“Gods! Truly? It was clean? You think that’s all children need? A clean house? An overseer that punishes them at any sign of misbehaviour?”

Even as he speaks, he remembers Dumbledore was born in the past *century*, like his great grandfather . And he knows, oh, he knows how children were raised back then. He knows how old Sirius raised Arcturus, with no ounce of affection.

Dumbledore doesn’t get it.

He left Harry in a *clean* house, too. For men his generation, a plate of gruel, a clean place, a roof over the head, probably looks perfectly acceptable.

“He didn’t have shit, that’s why he stole. That’s why they all stole. Do you think he was the only child in that building prone to thievery?”

“It wasn’t the stealing,” Dumbledore counters. “The Matron said he was terrorising the other children, that he took joy in scaring them.”

“And they were terrorising him! You don’t get it- he didn’t get it either! He talked so casually about the most horrific shit that he had to go through, with a smile sometimes.” Like when he told Sirius how that Billy boy shoved his head through a fucking window. How he found that gambler dead on the streets. Voldemort never understood what damage that did to him. “He wasn’t fucking evil. Not at eleven. He was broken. Those muggle broke him, they thought him possessed, they had him exorcised, dosed in holy water, they pushed him aside and you couldn’t give him a f*ucking chance*!”

“He was…” Dumbledore puts himself together, though it’s clear Sirius got to him. “All that may be true and I admit I did not- back then, I did not consider such things. Many children were orphaned in the wars that plagued Europe, magical and muggle alike, at the time. These were everyday realities and perhaps we all grew desensitised to them. But, Sirius, there was something wrong with him. There was already rot there-”

“You should have tried!”

“I did,” Dumbledore says. “I tried to speak to him at Hogwarts, to keep an eye on him, to approach him-”

“You scared him! You don’t know how fucking terrifying you are when you get mad. You did not try enough! You may not have made Voldemort- I am all aware he did that on his own- but you certainly stood by and watched him do it, without even properly trying!”

“You love him,” Dumbledore says, awed.

“Of course I fucking love him!” Sirius stands. “Why the fuck do you think I abandoned everything my father wanted for me? That I abandoned you? James. I abandoned him too. I didn’t think how the war will- what Voldemort’s victory would mean for Lily. I kept lying to myself it will be alright. Of course I loved him. But it was too late- he’s too broken to value it, no matter how hard I tried.”

Dumbledore closes his eyes. When he opens them, he looks older by another hundred years. “I am so sorry, Sirius. I couldn’t have imagined- I shouldn’t have sent you to him.”

Sirius wants to tell him he should feel sorry for Voldemort, but it will be in vain. No one- not Dumbledore, not anyone, will ever feel sorry for Voldemort.

For poor, lonely, hungry Tom who’s been wronged from the second he was born.

Voldemort himself had no pity, no mercy, for Tom Riddle.

“Despite your feelings, you did the right thing in the end.” Dumbledore stands as well. “And I know now how much that cost you- how hard making the right choice is, when the one you love is what must be sacrificed. You are a far better man than I gave you credit for. You made a terrible mistake, but you made it out of-”

“Fuck you!” Sirius heads for the door, but he turns back when he reaches it. “Stay away from me, Dumbledore. I told you once that I don’t mean you any harm. And it’s true- it was always true; it still is. I, too, always respected you. But you are my enemy. I want no violence, yet

my father was right. He advised me well. Everyone that doesn't share my blood is my enemy. I won't forget it again, and I want nothing to do with you."

"I understand," Dumbledore says, and he's back to his kind old man's face.

"You're just like him," Sirius spits. "Alone. You'll always be alone. You secluded yourself, in your geniuses, in your power, in all the ways you're different from the rest of us normal people. I pity you. And I pity him, too. He sacrificed me for power, for a promise of immortality. And you sacrificed whatever you had with Grindelwald for the greater good. For your morals. I hope it was worth it, but looking at you, all alone in this tower of yours, I don't think it was. And I know it's not worth it for him either, wherever he may be."

Just like when he screams at his mother, Sirius knows he's being too harsh, that Dumbledore is a convenient scapegoat, someone to blame, to yell at, someone to hurt, in the absence of the person that truly deserves Sirius' anger.

Dumbledore sacrificed the man he loved, defeated him in a duel, to protect the world. He did not do it out of selfishness. He did it for the innocent.

Voldemort sacrificed Sirius for his own gain.

Dumbledore gave him a Hallow, so easily, relinquished it with no fight.

Voldemort would have never given him the ring if he knew about the Hallows.

(-)

Sirius twists the ring around his finger, ignoring the tension around him.

Apparently, there's drama unfolding upstairs. His mother sent Kreacher to tell Sirius that Astrid's mother is giving her horrible advice, putting the baby in danger.

One of Astrid's sisters came to speak with Thor, and she's no doubt complaining to him about Sirius' mother, though Sirius doesn't understand the language.

The Healer in training, Hartwood protégée, waits in front of Sirius.

"You must decide on a course of action, and soon," she tells him.

"What does Hartwood think?" Sirius asks. "Whatever he believes is best, do that and ignore the others."

The labour has been going on for too long, apparently. Sirius, with his fucked up relationship with time, isn't really sure how long. The days and nights mix together lately, hours lost somewhere in the interim.

“Giving her the potion would be safest for her; she’s exhausted, it would help her,” the woman explains. “But it might harm the child, though the risks are low. So it is your choice.”

It seems *absurd* they’re asking him to decide.

“How might it harm the baby?” his grandfather asks, at the same time Thor orders, with a heavy accent, to give Astrid the potion.

The Healer turns to answer his grandfather.

“Bring Bella here,” Sirius demands, even if he can’t see Kreacher anymore. But the old elf hears his orders, no matter where he might be around the house.

Everyone looked at him like he lost his mind when he was told Astrid went into labour and he asked Cygnus to bring Bella over.

“She’s unstable,” his grandfather hissed at him.

“She kills anything that gets too close to you,” his mother reminded him.

But Sirius can’t be in that room, the women won’t let him, yet he has to be there. So Bella can stand in for him.

His child should be born with one of them in the room.

Bella and Kreacher Apparate in front of him.

It makes the other men shut up.

“What does Astrid want?” Sirius asks her.

Bella’s eyes are a little sharper, a little clearer than last he saw her.

“She refuses to say anything, trapped between her mother and yours, yelling over her head.” Bella makes a face. “She’s in a bad way, fainted a few times; what a weakling.”

Fantastic.

His grandfather and Thor start fighting with each other. Regulus and Astrid’s brother- Sirius must learn his name one of these days- are quick to follow them.

The idiot stands, aggressive, maybe thinking he can intimidate Regulus, who is almost a head shorter than the northerner and at least fifty pounds lighter.

If these people weren’t blood purists, Sirius would think they breed with giants. The men in Astrid’s family are ridiculously big, giving even Rodolphus a run for his money.

Regulus is not easily intimidated. Only Sirius or his grandfather can put him in a corner, no foreigner can manage it.

Cygnus is on his feet as well. Lucius is trying to calm them all down.

“What would you do, if you were Astrid?” Sirius asks Bella, ignoring the others.

Bella hums. “I wouldn’t take the potion,” she says, slowly. “But if it were Narcissa in her place, I would force that potion down her throat and there would be no one to stop me.”

That settles it. “Give her the potion,” Sirius tells the Healer. He has to raise his voice to be heard over the others.

The Healer, Bella and Astrid’s sister return to Astrid’s room.

Everyone stares at him. But the men in his family know better than to question him with foreigners there.

And apparently his in-laws are happy with the decision, because they calm down.

Shortly after, he hears his mother screeching above them. Sirius had not heard the slightest noise from Astrid, for the entire day and half the night at this point.

“It will be over shortly,” he tells the others, checking his watch. It’s almost three in the morning. Blacks are only born under the stars, so it can’t last much longer.

He goes back to playing with his ring.

(-)

When they place his son in his arms, the world fades around him; there are no worries, no bad memories, no fears, no hate.

There’s only Sirius and Orion Black.

Not once did he think of his son’s name, too busy sulking, hiding, ignoring it as best as he could. But he knows his name as soon as he sees him. There was never any other option.

His mother has tear tracks on her cheeks. She looks exhausted; all the women are exhausted, had been in that room for more than twenty-four hours.

Astrid’s relatives give Bella a wide berth.

Astrid smiles, weakly, a bit out of it, her eyes hazy, and when Sirius can be bothered to look at anything other than his son, he smiles back at her.

In no time, the other women leave, one by one, his mother and Astrid’s mother still hissing insults at each other.

Narcissa kisses Sirius’ cheek on her way out. Druella pats his shoulder.

Bellatrix doesn’t leave; as the others trail out the door, she goes to sit on the windowsill.

“Are you alright?” Sirius asks Astrid.

She answers him in Norwegian. But Hartwood said she is alright, just exhausted, and the baby is alright, too.

He looks alright. He looks *perfect*. Sirius feels he can’t breathe, as he stares at him in awe, and at the same time, he feels he doesn’t need to breathe.

In that moment, Sirius doesn’t need anything.

Kreacher is shaking in a corner, crying silently.

“Come here, take a look at him,” Sirius invites the old bugger.

Trembling all over, Kreacher approaches the bed, where Sirius sits on the edge. He stands on his toes, one of his ears standing tall, the other twitching uncontrollably.

“Little Master,” he whispers reverently. “Little Master! Kreacher loves him, Kreacher is so happy! Little master has the stars in his eyes, like his father, and his father, and his father before him.”

A distinctive light grey.

“Dobby won’t touch him, Tessuth won’t touch him,” Sirius instructs. “He is your duty.”

Kreacher weeps harder. He steps back, bows low, his forehead touching the floor.

“Master honours Kreacher. Kreacher will care for him as he cared for Master Regulus, and for Master Orion. For Master Arcturus, and so many before him. Kreacher will take good care of Little Master.” With a sob, he goes on. “Kreacher would have taken care of Bad Master, too.” He lifts his head to look at Sirius. “But Mistress Walburga would let no one touch her brightest star. She took care of Bad Master on her own, day and night, and only allowed Master Orion to hold him, no one else. Only she and Master Orion were allowed in the nursery, when Bad Master was newborn. Not even Kreacher was permitted entry.”

Kreacher fades into the background, but he’s there. Unseen, unheard, but always there.

Finally, his grandfather and Thor come in.

“Orion,” Sirius introduces his son, and he could swear something wet glints in his grandfather’s hard eyes for a second.

Sirius stands, relinquishes Orion to him, lets him have a moment.

Thor moved to his daughter side, kissing her head, whispering something in Norwegian.

When his grandfather gives Orion back, Thor doesn’t presume to ask to hold him, simply comes to stand by Sirius, look down on the boy.

His grandfather goes to Astrid, and he kisses her forehead, too. He *never* did that for Sirius or anyone else. “You’ve given us a great gift, Astrid. Thank you.”

Once they leave, Sirius doesn’t let anyone else come in.

Cygnus, Regulus, Lucius, Astrid’s brother- they can all meet Orion in the morning.

Sirius would let Harry come, but it’s four in the morning and Harry is hopefully sleeping.

Astrid falls asleep, too, shortly after.

Sirius sits on the armchair by the window, and Bella comes to curl beside Sirius, knees to her chest. She’s still so skinny, that they both fit inside it. She puts her head on his shoulder, and they both look at Orion, in silence.

Her skeletal fingers gently brush against Orion’s cheek.

“Perfect,” she whispers, and now tears fall down her face. “He’s perfect.”

Sirius carefully extricates his wand, charms the windows open, and then hands the wand to her.

“Kreacher, bring me the ceremonial knife,” he orders.

Bella meets his eyes.

“Sirius.”

“It’s your choice,” he says, and he bends to kiss her. Her lips are chapped and dry under his.

She makes a tortured sound, draws back to look at Orion.

When Kreacher presents them with the knife, Bella only hesitates for a second.

She takes it.

The stars watch over them, and Bella makes her vows to Orion.

They are in contradiction to the vows she made to Voldemort. Bella swears to protect Orion, to keep him safe, and she knows that if Voldemort were to return right now, filled with rage, Orion wouldn’t be safe. No one would. He’d be a threat to everyone.

But Bella picks family, in the end. Blood family, that is. Bella is a Black, no matter her name, no matter the love she carries for Rodolphus.

Orion doesn’t cry during the ritual, though he squirms lightly in Sirius’ arms, opening his unfocused eyes.

“Cygnus lied to you,” Sirius says. “He wouldn’t be punished in your stead if you were to disappear.”

Bella watches the blood dripping down her palm, where she cut herself.

“Am I allowed a wand?”

“No. No wand, and no appearances in public. No access to Lestrange vault or to Lestrange Manor. Cygnus was given power of decision over all your assets.”

“I don’t want the potions. They mess with my mind.”

He kisses her again, lightly. “If you swear on my life that you won’t harm Harry, then I won’t let them drug you anymore.”

That, Bella doesn’t swear. She refuses.

They both sigh. But they both treasure this moment together, before Bella will have to go back to her home, to her potions.

Yet she’s holding Sirius’ wand, he is unarmed, and she could easily make her escape like this. But she doesn’t. She gives him the wand back, and rests her head on his shoulder again.

(-)

There’s a shadow taking form in his dreams, watching him. Every night, its shape grows sharper. Sirius can sense it, but it never scares him.

And then, eventually, it calls to him.

“Sirius,” the shadow says, voice clear. A voice that is both so familiar to Sirius, and yet unfamiliar, too.

“Yes,” Sirius answers, and he doesn’t feel alone anymore.

Chapter End Notes

We'll have the Horcrux arc next chapter! I miss writing Voldemort so much, so most likely we will see him again (him, not Tom) either next chapter, or the one after that.

This chapter practically closes all the loose end from what I call the second arc of the story, so that means we're moving into the final act. I won't predict chapters, but If I'd have to, I'd say around 4-5 are left.

I will try to update Canis Major next, since I miss Voldemort and his POV so much.

Thank you for reading, and I'd love to know your thoughts about the chapter! ❤️

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

I know it's been a long wait! I'm sorry! Life decided it wants to prank me, so I injured by back, twice. I'm still recovering, and it will be a long process to become strong again.

This chapter is over 35k, so I asked on Tumbler what I should do, and the popular opinion was to split it.
So here is the first part! Nothing much happens, the interesting parts are in the second part, that with be published Friday or Saturday (17 August) at the latest.

Also, I am on pretty strong pain killers, so I'm bound to have made more typos than ever! Please excuse me and feel free to point them out in the comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hello," a young man says, and when Sirius turns around, the dream from before dissolves, and he finds himself in a dilapidated room, with paint coming off the walls; crowded, squalid Knockturn Alley coils and twists outside the window.

He leans against a simple desk, long legs crossed at the ankles. He's wearing a suit, cheap and muggle, but pressed impeccably, no crease in sight.

Tom Riddle is striking. He can't be much older than the boy in the picture Sirius used to have in a nightstand, but he's far handsomer, impossibly so, because the one in the picture was unnaturally still, face blank, but this one is animated, and he's smiling.

He has a dimple in his right cheek, exquisitely placed. His eyes are the warmest brown Sirius has ever seen. Beautifully shaped, with long, black eyelashes. Everything is perfection, from his thick, brown hair, to his broad shoulders, long limbs, and slim fingers. The ring is on one of them, and a cigarette between the others.

"I didn't know you smoked," Sirius whispers.

Though- of course he must have. Voldemort didn't seem a stranger to the habit when he first stole Sirius' cigarette.

The smile widens. Tom flicks his thumb, and ash falls into a crystal ashtray.

"Another bad habit I picked up from the muggles," Tom says.

"What other bad habit did you pick?"

Tom's finger traces the grand ashtray. "Stealing." Taking a drag off of the cigarette, Tom uncrosses his legs. "Enough about me." He tilts his head, eyes sparkling with curiosity. "Long have I wanted to meet you, Sirius; I waited patiently, in darkness, and now I finally can."

Sirius watches him as he straightens to his full height, putting off his cigarette. He stalks toward Sirius, slowly, confidently, graceful.

He once said his Patronus used to be a cat, and it always made sense, but now it's more obvious than ever.

"Why couldn't you, before?"

"*He* was there," Tom says. His nose, as well defined as his jaw, wrinkles in distaste, his eyes glint with displeasure. "But even if I couldn't reach out to you, I felt you reaching out to me. All those months you wore me, kept me close, protected me; sharing yourself with me."

He stops half an inch away from Sirius. Tom closes his eyes, and his eyelashes cast shadows on excellent cheekbones. "I felt you, Sirius, I felt everything." He opens his eyes again. They aren't red, yet they have the same intensity.

Something warns Sirius to run away, to hide. Voldemort is still Voldemort, no matter the changed exterior, and *'haven't you learned your lesson?'* a voice demands.

"I'm not him," Tom says, harshly. He lifts his hand, the Gaunt ring snug on his finger. "I wouldn't hurt you the way he did. I felt that, too, Sirius. I suffered with you."

Sirius has only a moment to think whatever this is, it isn't Voldemort. It's *worse*. There's something far more dangerous about the being standing before him-

And then his fingers touch Sirius' face.

He wakes up.

(-)

Gifts come from all over the world, mountains of them, scattered around Grimmauld. Most come from inside the United Kingdom, and then from Norway, but it seems at least one thing comes from every country, Sirius decides, when he glimpses a card from the Minister of Magic in Japan, whom Sirius has never met, but apparently is an old friend of his grandfather Pollux.

It was the same when Sirius was born, he is told.

It takes the elves and Sirius' mother weeks to go through the piles. Sirius hasn't even heard of some of the people that sent gifts, his hand cramps after signing 'thank you' note after

note, so his grandfather starts to write them in his stead.

One gift, he recognises, even if he has no note attached to it.

“Who would send these horrid things?” his mother scoffs, throwing the red, tiny, hand-knitted socks straight into the fireplace.

When they don’t burn, remain intact in the dancing flames, Sirius knows they’re from Dumbledore.

There’s another gift that leaves his mother frowning. “Mary Macdonald,” she spits. “Who’s that?”

It makes him smile, a tender feeling in his chest, that after everything, Mary still doesn’t think him a Death Eater.

All the gifts are for Orion, but Sirius tells Harry they’re for him, too, and at least Harry actually enjoys opening the presents, delights in finding an interesting toy or plush animal, amongst very boring, expensive blankets and gold pacifiers.

(-)

“You don’t like it,” Tom says, though Sirius didn’t voice the thought. “You don’t like ugly things.”

“It’s beneath you,” Sirius tells him, eying the small, grey flat. Rundown and old.

“I agree. However, I am trapped here.” Tom looks out the window. It’s always night outside, shadows moving up and down Knockturn Alley, below them. “He made me here, he killed me here. It’s all I know.”

“Here? I-”

“You thought he made me at Hogwarts,” Tom finishes his thought. “No. He wanted to wear the ring, and he couldn’t wear it as a Horcrux, not under Dumbledore’s nose. So he waited. It is here that it all ended.”

“*You* made it-”

“I was him, until he made me. After that, I was trapped here, and he became someone else. He was free, and he went on to do everything I planned to do, but I am here, trapped.” Tom sighs, comes closer. “You were not the only one he betrayed.”

Tom is fascinating. The way he speaks, the way he looks, the way he walks. He's so distinct from Voldemort, and yet so painfully similar.

Sirius wonders how much of him is Voldemort, his memories, his soul, and how much is dark magic.

"And yet, I crave him. I need him. I forgive him," Tom says.

Sirius feels that same need. *Is it mine, or is it Tom's?*

(-)

"Where is Bellatrix?" Andromeda finally asks, after many awkward, tense Saturday dinners. "You say you want to have me here to reunite our family, yet my sisters clearly don't share your desires."

"Mum," Dora cautions, from where she sits, always at Cygnus' side.

"Not even Mother wishes to see me," Andromeda goes on.

"I told you, Bella is sick," Cygnus answers her. "Druella and Narcissa have to look after her, so I can attend these dinners with you-"

"*Sick*," Andromeda scoffs. "Prey tell, what ails her? I have never seen her sick in my entire life."

"You've missed more than half a decade of her life," Sirius' mother points out, and Andromeda's jaws tighten in anger.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Cygnus offers. "She's home."

Andromeda glares at him. "Fine. Then I shall see for myself. *Sick Bella,* really." She stands, throws her napkin on the table. "No," she snaps at Dora, when she, too, tries to stand. "Wait for me here."

At least Andromeda now trusts them enough to leave Dora alone with them in Grimmauld.

Cygnus is much softer with Dora than he'd been with his daughters, but he's still his usual stern, cold self. However, Dora seems to like him the best out of the entire family.

Sirius' mother enjoys Dora, too, smiles at her antics, asks her to take the shape of random people she sees in her magazines.

Harry loves her for the same reasons.

Astrid is perfectly polite, but she interacts as little as possible with both Dora and Andromeda.

They finish their dinner, and Andromeda still hasn't come back. Sirius sits alone in his office, caressing his ring, as the rest of his family goes to bed, even Dora. Sirius can hear her excitement over getting a room, one that her mother used to get when she'd spend time in Grimmauld as a child.

Cygnus paces around the house, restless.

Andromeda returns at down; for a second, it's like having Bella back again. The *real* Bella, not the potion controlled one.

There's fury on Andromeda's face, magic crackling around her, frizzing her hair.

Her eyes are red rimmed and wet.

"What are you doing to her?" she screams at Cygnus. "You fucking monster! What did you do to my sister?"

"What would you have me do?" Cygnus asks. "Set her loose on the population? Let her retrieve her master?"

The fight is terrible, just like Bella's fights with Cygnus used to be. Andromeda was never like this on her own, too afraid of Cygnus to scream at him, if Bella wasn't there to shield her.

"You could have loved her," Andromeda says, voice shaking with rage and pain.

"I love her," Cygnus growls back. "Why else would I care for a deranged murderer, keep her safe?"

It makes Sirius flinch, hearing him call Bellatrix a deranged murderer.

She is.

She might be, but Sirius never saw her that way. For him, she'll always be his older cousin, his surrogate mother, his soulmate.

"You call that love, Father? If you'd have truly loved her, appreciated her, then she wouldn't have ended up begging for Voldemort's attention."

Cygnus sneers. "Strange, how I raised three daughters and only one joined Voldemort. Only one tortured people for a bit of a laugh. If the fault lied with me, surely, you and Narcissa would have followed her example."

The usual. Throwing blame around, screaming, old grievances coming to life.

Finally, Sirius thinks, pleased. Andromeda has been coming over almost every Saturday, but this, right now, is the first time she truly talks to Cygnus.

Oh, yes, they communicate over wine and roasted ducks, they make polite conversation, but members of his family don't know how to talk to each other, not truly.

This, *this* is what was needed. Sirius only stays to make sure Cygnus doesn't think of communicating in his own special way, that often involved a slap or two.

He doubts it, he hadn't struck the girls once they hit puberty, but just in case, he stays.

"I will take care of her," Andromeda says, when she exhausted herself. "I will -I'll care for her. She's- gods, she's-"

She starts crying, and Cygnus stands, goes to hug her, holds her to his chest.

"She barely spoke to me. It took her an hour to recognise me, and another one to understand I was truly there," Andromeda sobs. "She's so thin."

"It's hard to feed her. The potions take away her appetite, but if I don't give her the potions, she starts muttering about finding her lord."

Soon enough, Andromeda half moves back to her childhood home. Narcissa, who avoids Andromeda at all costs, finds this particular cost too high. Narcissa will never stop visiting Bellatrix, even if now Andromeda is there so often.

Sirius struggles with being around Bella but when he forces himself, something calms inside him seeing them together.

Seeing Bella smile as Andromeda braids her hair, and Bella paints Narcissa's nails.

"It will destroy her marriage," his mother says, when Cygnus comments how often Andromeda is home. "Spending so much time away from her husband, having to explain to him it's to care for Bella, who hates his very existence and wishes him dead…it will destroy whatever foolish notion of love they think they share."

Cygnus nods with a satisfied smirk.

(-)

No one lets Sirius forget how jealous he'd been when Regulus was born, how hostile towards his little brother.

Harry is not like that. He touches Orion gently, and he proclaims he loves him, brings his toys to show to Orion, who mostly sleeps in Sirius' arms with no interest in any toy.

Yet Harry is hurt. And confused. He doesn't understand why Sirius' mother no longer pays much attention to him, Astrid even less. It's heartbreaking hearing him asking about them, asking for them, and getting little to nothing in return.

Sirius screams at his mother about it, and after a terrible fight, she gets a little better, but he doesn't dare say anything to Astrid. She's a new mother, and Sirius heard women are unstable in this time period- besides, she's a stranger to him, so he isn't sure how to approach it.

"Everyone loves Orion more," Harry says, and it's not with anger, not with hate, just with a sigh that shatters whatever is left of Sirius' soul.

"That's not true," he lies. "It's just that he's very small, and he needs a lot of help and taking care of, yeah?"

Harry nods, but his little chin remains pressed into his chest, not looking at Sirius.

"I don't love him more," Sirius tells him, raising his chin, gently.

And Harry smiles then. "I know. You love me, but …it's just you."

Even when they go to Malfoy Manor, Narcissa fawns over Orion, and so does Lucius.

At least there's Draco, who has no interest in the baby, and definitely prefers Harry over him.

Eventually, when Orion is two months old, Sirius hopes enough time has passed and Astrid is all recovered from the stress of the birth or whatever it is that troubles women during this time.

"Harry is asking for you," he says, one night, visiting her in her chambers.

She frowns. "I just saw him at dinner-"

"No, I mean, in general. He misses spending time with you. More than just at meals."

Astrid watches him with her pleasant expression. "I miss him, too," she says, after a second. "I've been a bit…preoccupied."

"Yes, I understand," he hurries to assure her, still awkward and uncertain when it comes to communicating with his wife. "But if you feel better…"

"I do," she says, with her gorgeous fake little smile.

Sirius should let it go, he knows she'll do as he asks and pay more attention to Harry now, but-

"Look." He sits on the armchair facing her. "I know you'll obviously always prioritise Orion, I know you have no duty to Harry, but he means the world to me."

She opens her mouth, but he cuts over her.

"You asked once if I am easy to please. This would please me. If you can make an effort."

Like she used to, before Orion.

Sirius isn't sure she stopped only because of that new mother-son bond she has with Orion, or because now that she gave him an heir, as was expected of her, she feels more secure in her place in the house. He doesn't really care what her reasoning or her motives are. He just wants her to fake love Harry, if she can't actually love him like a son.

He only see through her falshoods because he's an adult, and he'd been raised with Narcissa and Andromeda.

But Harry should buy into it. He isn't really the most perceptive child- he actually thinks Sirius' mother is 'the best'. Even Draco caught on that she is a harpy. He starts crying and asking for Lucius as soon as he's faced with Sirius' mum.

"It is no effort," Astrid says, after some seconds, when she is sure he has nothing else to add.

"Thank you."

She's true to her word; starting the following day, Astrid makes sure to pay attention to Harry again, to play with him, cuddle him, and Harry is so happy about it, his smiles as wide as they used to be, and he clings to her with such joy, it still manages to break Sirius' heart.

There's nothing to do about the others. His mother- well, he never could force her to do anything, and she does have genuine moments when she apparently at least feels pity for Harry and she seeks him out to read him a story, but she's *obsessed* with Orion, more than Astrid really, spending most of her days around the crib. Most of her nights, too.

At night, when Orion cries and Sirius goes to investigate, he finds Astrid and his mother already in the nursery. And while it's obvious Astrid came from her room, eyes sleepy, robe disheveled, it's also obvious his mother was camping in the nursery, sleeping in the armchair, fully clothed.

She seems almost hateful when she has to hand over Orion to Astrid, so she can feed him.

"Does she bother you?" Sirius asks Astrid occasionally, because he feels he must ask, that it's his duty to look after her needs and keep his crazy mother in check.

"No," she answers, because she's smart and she knows Sirius doesn't want to hear 'yes'.

Regulus was never one to be friendly with Harry; always polite, Sirius made sure of that, but when he visits he brings a gift for Harry and then proceeds to ignore his existence, focused on his wife.

Isadora is focused on herself. Sirius had hoped she and Astrid would become friends, would form a coalition against his mother, but no.

Not at all.

They seem in competition, over every little thing, and each seeks to endear themselves to Sirius' mother, who, naturally, dislikes them both.

Astrid was winning, slightly, purely because she already had a son. She sours when Isadora faints at breakfast and the Healer informs them later she's pregnant.

Once again, his mother gets that tense look about her, and finally, Astrid gets a little break from her, as she seems torn between spending her time glued to Orion, or pestering Isadora about not eating enough, or eating too much, not walking enough, or walking too much.

When Regulus comes to visit, he's as useless as Sirius is in getting his wife away from their mother.

But, unlike Astrid, Isadora has family close by, so Mrs Selwyn comes to visit often, and she defends her daughter, which causes terrible fights with Sirius' mother, who demands Sirius denies Mrs Selwyn access to Grimmauld. Sirius does no such thing, so his mother grows frustrated with him.

"Maybe you should take Isadora with you to Egypt," Sirius suggests to Regulus, because he's going a little crazy in this house, with the women and Orion screaming at night, and Harry being clingy.

And his dreams, that are now almost always about Tom. Sirius dreads falling asleep, and at the same time, it's what makes him survive during the day, knowing he'll see Tom, soon.

Regulus scoffs. "I'm there to study. I need to focus on-"

"Father studied with mum there."

"I'm not Father. Gods know how he kept up with his classes and put up with Mum at the same time." He shrugs. "Besides, Mum wouldn't let me take Isadora away. She wants to make sure the pregnancy goes well."

Sirius struggles getting his family in order. He doesn't know how his father did it, how he made them obey him.

He knew, anyway, as soon as he was out of Azkaban and he accepted doing what he was told, he *knew* in the back of his mind that it would be close to impossible to wrestle control back from them. He knew, but he had no other choice left, he only had his family, and he let them steer him around like a dog on a leash.

"You're suffocating," Tom tells him, when he sleeps. "I can feel it. You're as much of a prisoner as I am."

At least when his grandfather comes to eat with them, the girls don't jab at each other during dinner, and his mother keeps her craziness to a minimum.

Even Harry sits a little straighter in his high chair, a little quieter.

And then the *worst* happens. His grandmother Irma comes from France, to spend some time with her great-grandson, and after a single night with her there, he knows he won't make it.

“We’re going to the Manor,” Sirius announces the following morning, during breakfast, after an awful fight between his mother and grandmother. “Astrid, Orion, Harry and I,” he clarifies, when everyone stares at him in confusion.

“I’ve come to spend time with Orion,” his grandmother says, displeased.

His mother stares at him in horror, and a vindictive side of Sirius is satisfied. She hates being alone with Grandmother Irma.

“I can’t deal with her!” his mum yells at his father, when they receive a letter notifying them his grandparents are coming to visit.

“I have to work, Walbu-”

“No! You’re staying home! I can’t deal with Mother! You deal with her!”

His father always stayed, no matter what important meetings he had to cancel. Sirius heard it was his father that banished Irma to France, when his mother was bed-bound after losing her daughter, and Irma made a hateful comment, as she often does.

They both glare at Sirius now.

Isadora looks hopeless, probably terrified at the prospect of being left alone with the crazy old women.

Fuck them all.

“You are all welcome to visit us, every other day, for an hour,” he adds.

They open their mouths, and they scream exactly like the other, so Sirius speaks again before they can get to it.

“We didn’t have a honeymoon.” He makes sure his voice sounds firm. “We’re taking one now.” Turning to Astrid, he says. “Get ready. We leave within the hour.”

Finally, a genuine expression graces her features. Relief and excitement flash bright in her eyes, and he’s never seen her get out of her chair so quickly, taking Harry with her.

Of course, Sirius still gets screamed at, until his head throbs with pain, but once Kreacher packed what they need, and they’re all finally standing in the Black manor’s entry hall, he breathes out.

“Nice and quiet,” Kreacher mutters. “Thank you, Master. Thank you for taking Kreacher with you. Kreacher hates it when Mistress Irma fights with Mistress Walburga. Kreacher’s ears hurt.”

They still have a screamer with them, but even Orion can’t outdo his mother and grandmother.

It’s much better. So much better.

Sirius takes his father's bedroom, and he gives the next grandest chamber to Astrid. It was supposed to belong to the lady of the house, but since his mother rarely came to the Manor, it hasn't been used much.

Many, *many* women paraded throughout the Manor, but none touched the lady's bedroom. His father kept them in the guest rooms.

His nights are still plagued with Tom, but his days are better.

It's the clean air of the countryside, the silence, the lack of stern faces telling him what to do, at every turn.

Harry loves it, running around like a maniac, with Snuffles, because Sirius wouldn't abandon Snuffles in Grimmauld. Especially since his grandmother hates dogs.

They suffer visits from his family members, but they suffer them gracefully, because they know they'll end within the hour.

Lucius and Narcissa are far better and actually wanted company when they come for lunch or dinner.

Andromeda enjoys herself more, now that she only has to eat with Sirius for the mandatory Saturday dinners they've negotiated. Sometimes, Cygnus comes with her, but she seems fine with that.

Dora loves the manor, eats in a hurry, and then takes off investigating, Kreacher following her around, muttering about half-bloods all the time, but keeping her alive.

"Watch out with that one," Andromeda once whispers to Sirius, gaze fixed on Astrid conversing with Cygnus. "She's worse than Narcissa. It's impressive how much she lets me know she disapproves of all my life choices, without ever saying it."

It's true. He can't pinpoint what exactly Astrid does, perfectly well mannered and friendly to Andromeda, but there's just something that screams *'I don't like blood traitors'* about her. Sirius wants to speak to her about it, to tell her Andromeda is his blood, and thus to be respected at his table, only he truly cannot come up with a single example of Astrid being even slightly inappropriate with Andromeda. What would he tell her, what reproach could he find, when she smiles at his cousin, answers all her questions, inquires if she's happy with the meal, if there's anything else she'd like, thanks her for visiting, kisses her cheek.

Evy brings the twins, so it's a bit noisy when she visits, but still preferable to Grimmauld.

The twins are turning out to be a double menace, and Evy looks exhausted all the time, but they have decided to follow Harry around like ducklings, so at least there's that. They all laugh and play and torture Kreacher, while Evy pretends to talk to Sirius and Astrid, but mostly naps on their couch.

Sirius and Astrid manage to speak to each other through the day, while playing with Harry and keeping Orion from screaming.

They talk more during dinner, when the boys are asleep, and it's just them.

It's easier to communicate like that. She defrosts a little bit, week after week, and something real shines through all that grace and politeness she hides behind.

Sometimes, Mrs Pettigrew escapes her quarters and wanders through the house, but she's easily redirected back to her room by Kreacher. She calls Kreacher 'Peter'.

She called Dobby 'Peter', too.

She calls Harry 'Peter', when she stumbles upon him.

"Who is the old lady living here?" Astrid asks, in the gardens."I glimpsed her a couple of times."

"She's the mother of a friend I lost in the war. I promised to take care of her." Sirius pushes Snuffles's head out of the way. "Not the face, boy!"

Not that Orion minds getting his face licked. He's smiling, reaching for Snuffles, even as Sirius tries to keep him away.

He doesn't care if Snuffles licks Orion, but he noticed Astrid isn't comfortable with it, even if she never voiced this complaint.

Orion is loud. 'Black lungs,' his mother said.

The boy is quick to voice his pleasure, with a high-pitched noise, and his displeasure…oh, *no one* misses that.

Harry, sitting between Astrid and Sirius on the blanket, holding one of Orion's hands, examining his little fingers, says, "Snuffy is good dog! You can lick me!"

"Orion is much smaller, Harry," Astrid tells him. "We need to be careful, yes?"

"Very small!" Harry agrees, and he puts Orion's hand in his, to compare them. "Look!"

"It's nice of you to take care of your friend's mother," Astrid says.

Sirius smiles at her. "What can I say, I'm a nice man."

Astrid nods in agreement, with a smile of her own.

Taking advantage, Sirius goes on. "We lost many people in the war. Some dead, some as good as dead. It's our duty to look after their families. Like Harry, Mrs Pettigrew, Evy and her kids. Regina and Regis' father was a very close childhood friend of mine- he's also family, in a way. Rabastan is Bella's brother-in-law."

"Yes, I know," Astrid says, no signs of suspicion on her face, despite what Evy said, that she asked about the twins, if they were Sirius' bastards.

They actually get along well, and Sirius thinks Astrid genuinely enjoys Evy's company.

"Regina, especially, takes after Rabastan," he insists, to further reassure her the twins aren't his.

In reality, Sirius would go as far as to say that the more the girl grows, the more she looks like *Rodolphus*.

The brothers do look alike, and while Regina is practically Rabastan's spitting image, there's something about her that reminds him so strongly of Rodolphus at times. He thinks it's probably because she's a very serious toddler, very focused.

And the way she glares when something doesn't go her way…Lucius saw it, too.

"*Rodolphus' death glare,"* he whispered, once.

"That's not true!" Narcissa snapped. *"She's a lovely girl! Don't say that about her!"*

Narcissa treats the twins better than she treats most kids, outside Draco and Harry.

However, she is yet to say a *single* word to Evy, even if sometimes they spend hours together at Black Manor. And while she said the twins are welcome to come to Malfoy Manor, she made it clear it would be *just* the children.

Evy doesn't care. *"I can't wait for them to be old enough to send them to Malfoy Manor for a full weekend! I'd get a break, and no matter how much of a bitch Narcissa is, I know they'd be taken care of."*

Lucius, trying to find a solution, apparently decided the best thing to do for everyone is to get Evy married, slap a veneer of respectability over the family.

Technically, Lucius is not supposed to talk to Evy, either, but he finds small moments, when Narcissa is elsewhere occupied, chasing Draco around.

"Never again," Evy tells him.

"*Aldfrith is a good man," he insists, hurriedly. "He's a widower, too, he's aware of…the situation, and he doesn't mind. He needs a mother for his son, so I don't understand why you won't even meet to talk to him!"*

Evy smiles at him, fondly. "You're cute, Lucius. Now, shut up, your wife is coming back."

"How is Bellatrix feeling?" Astrid asks, casually. Even with her skills, Sirius detects the hint of curiosity.

No matter how many friends she makes, no one can tell her what is going on with Bella, after all. Though he's sure she heard plenty about the Bella from before Azkaban.

"She's recovering in her father's home," Sirius answers, kissing Orion's head. He has him in his lap, sitting, back supported against Sirius' chest.

Though he's squirming because he wants Snuffles, or he wants to go with Harry, who grew bored with sitting around and is now chasing Snuffles around.

Sirius is pretty sure Orion will start screaming in the next few minutes.

"When she recovers, I'd like to thank her," Astrid says, though not once had she asked what exactly ails Bella. "She was very helpful when I gave birth. I've never seen anyone silence Mother, before. Quite impressive."

Sirius says nothing. What can he say? Be careful with her? She hates everyone? She killed the last woman I grew too close to?

But Astrid is a Black, now, though Sirius struggles to see her as such. Still, it will offer her the protection Marlene lacked.

Sirius went to Cygnus' house a handful of times, with Orion.

Once, Bella was too lost in her head to do much, she barely acknowledged him, and Sirius yelled at Cygnus that he's giving her too many potions.

"You take her to your home, then," Cygnus snapped. *"Oh, but you can't- you can't, because you'd one day wake up with Potter chopped up into little pieces. She mutters about it, when she's at her craziest. What she'd do to the boy, if she got her hands on him."*

Other times, she was awake enough to interact with him, to coo over Orion, smile at him sweetly, if a little...distantly.

Once, she started crying. *"I miss Rodolphus,"* she whispered. *"I want Rodolphus. You all have your partners, and children, even Andromeda, and I have nothing. I took care of all of you, I raised you all, but I have nothing."*

Sirius hadn't visited, since then.

When Orion starts making sounds of protest, his impatience reaching a peak, Sirius hands him over to Astrid.

Generally, when he howls, only she can calm him, though Sirius heard …well, not fights, because they were one-sided, but he heard his mother demanding she be allowed to calm Orion, that Astrid is doing it 'wrong'.

If Astrid was truly a Black, born as one, they'd have found his mother dead in her bed by now.

But Astrid's patience is unlimited, though apparently that's just reserved for inside the home.

"She has quite the bite, that wife of yours," Evy mentioned, once. *"She's quick to put people in their place."*

Oh, that's how she calms him, Sirius thinks, when Astrid unlaces her corset, revealing a breast. Orion is quick to latch on.

Sirius smiles. *That's my son, alright.*

He can't remember his wedding night too well- he doesn't really want to- but he thinks Astrid's breasts are bigger than the little he remembers. Then again, she had her nightgown on that night.

A strange mix of emotions courses through him at the sight.

Arousal, brief and easy to push aside, it's been so long since he felt it. But also tenderness, because his son is right there, feeding happily.

Whatever it is, it makes him feel good. Orion is happy, Harry is happy, laughing close by, and his wife is gentle and kind to them.

She's a good wife, too. It's been over a year, and not once did she annoy him, bother him, anger him in any way. Sirius does not know a single person to have managed that before.

Even James could irritate Sirius, once in a while, rare as it was.

He thinks that if this had been…before, if he'd had married her before Voldemort, he would have grown to love her.

She's beautiful, intelligent, graceful, and she's strong. Resilient.

If he was the one shipped off to Norway, made to put up with her family, he'd have fared poorly. Yet she found a way to thrive here, despite everything.

Astrid's strength isn't showy, like Bella's or his own. She's more like Narcissa, like Lucius. Cunning, knowing when *not* to fight, when to ignore Sirius' mother.

"Did you want to come here?" Sirius asks her. "To marry me? Or did Thor make you?"

She looks away from Orion, her soft smile turning into a different one as she faces Sirius.

"Father always spoke of the possibility that one of us might marry a Black," she says. "I remember I was very little, and my brother was in that phase boys get- you know, just learning about the Order of Mages, about the Elven Wars, the Goblin Wars, running around pretending he was some great hero."

Sirius snorts. "Yeah, I had that phase, too. I'd use Kreacher as a goblin."

"So did my brother, with our elves. Anyway, he was pretending to be Helix Black one day, ready to face the great Ragnek, in the final battle of the goblin war. He was obsessed with talking about it. So my father said *'one of your sisters might one day marry a Black.'* Mother asked what he was talking about, and he said that his friend, Orion, had two sons, not much older than us, and they agreed they'll keep that option open, for when the time comes."

Sirius snorts. His father dangled Sirius and Regulus in front of many families, though he never pressured either into marriage. He died too soon for that.

“I remember Mother scoffed, said ‘you know those Blacks, no one is good enough for them. They’ll probably marry their cousins.’”

“We were too young for our cousins,” Sirius offers. “Though I might have ended up marrying Narcissa.”

If Andromeda hadn’t left, if his father had lived, and Andromeda married Lucius, as was the plan, then it is very likely Sirius would have married Narcissa.

His father already was asking Sirius if he gets along well with her, directed him to look after Narcissa at parties, to dance with her.

Sirius pretended not to understand what his father was really asking, and then he fell sick and nothing else mattered.

“We came to your father’s funeral, and I think Father would have wanted to talk to your grandfather about the possibility of an engagement for Freya; she was unmarried at the time, and she’s only a year younger than you.”

Sirius gets a pang of guilt for not being there, but…it’s not like before. It isn’t eviscerating.

His father didn’t care that Sirius missed the funeral.

“But he said ‘the eldest apparently ran away’, and left it at that. Until a year later, when Lucius sent word that Regulus was looking for a wife. Freya had married, so father asked me, this time.” She laughs. “I didn’t want to, because I knew he was the second son.”

“Gods.” Sirius mutters, shaking his head. He grew up around people with this mentality, he even understands it, in a twisted way, but he’s been away for years, surrounded by James and normal folk, so now he realises how insane it sounds.

She shrugs, delicately. “I was already a second daughter. My brother is the Heir, Freya was always Father’s favourite, my younger sister is Mother’s favourite. I thought the least they could do was marry me off to a first son. But Father pointed out that Regulus was the Heir Apparent at the time, so I accepted to come here and meet him.”

“With your little crown,” Sirius teases her, lightly.

“My grandfather is an Emperor, so I am perfectly within my rights to wear a tiara!”

“You looked very pretty,” he assures her.

“It became clear, however, that ‘the eldest son’ wasn’t as disowned as we’d have heard.”

Sirius smiles. “Yeah.”

“So I told father I don’t want Regulus.”

These people are so ridiculous, all of them. Her family, his family. Astrid, and himself.

James would stare in horror if he heard these things; even as a rich pureblood, accustomed to arranged marriages and knowing status matters…even he didn't know the complete insanity going on in the most noble houses.

"Regulus didn't want to get married, either," Sirius says.

"Oh, I could tell. You were doing your best to take attention off him. We danced, remember?"

"Yes." Vaguely. But he won't say that.

"Anyway, Father found me other options, but I didn't like them. He was exchanging letters with Grandfather, about a possible match in Russia, one that I wasn't opposed to, since I would be close to my favourite Aunt but that is when Lucius visited us, and said you are looking for a wife."

Orion is done feeding, and she covers herself, holds him gently on her shoulder, patting his back. The boy is half asleep, his adorable little face relaxed and content.

"Father instantly wanted it. Mother not so much- she preferred I go to Moscow, instead. She would have preferred that in any case, but there were the…troubling news about the war in Britain, to further displease her. They were fighting about it every night, in his office, both trying to convince me of their preference. During the day, Narcissa would take me aside, singing you praise."

"She's the perfect liar, Cissa is."

Astrid tilts her head, slightly. "She didn't lie," she says, softly. "It was my choice to come here."

"Why not Russia? Family close, and your Grandfather is the Emperor-"

"I love my family, but Grandfather has three male grandchildren and seven grand-daughters. My mother was his third daughter. I would have always been outranked there, always someone more important than me. In England, the Blacks are the equivalent of my family in Norway. And you are the Head of House."

"I see." Sirius wonders if he should joke that Narcissa once thought the same way, wanted to make Astrid's uncle's wife disappear, just so she could marry the Crown Prince, the future Emperor of Russia.

"And I remembered you are handsome, and young. The Russian match was fifteen years older and not as handsome."

"Didn't it concern you, that I was freshly out of prison?"

"My father does have connections here, you can imagine." Of course. Every country has spies in other countries, keeping an eye on things. "While he learned that you were…uh… prone to outbursts, he also learned that you are, in general, an honourable, brave man. Prison or not."

Sirius snorts. “No regrets so far?”

“None at all.” She sounds certain.

“Not even after you met Mum?” he jokes.Though it’s not much of a joke. His mother really is insufferable. She’s been a right horror during Astrid’s pregnancy, and now she acts as if she’s Orion’s mother.

“Not even,” she assures him, with a little smirk. “She was…an adjustment, but she means well.”

It occurs to Sirius, that if he was his old self, if he wasn’t heartbroken, he’d have kissed her, right then and there.

Then, it occurs to him, that he can still kiss her, heartbroken or not.

So he does. He moves slowly, carefully, giving her time to move away.

She doesn’t. It’s a light kiss, but it’s …nice.

After she puts Orion down, they kiss again, and he draws her closer.

It’s been so long since he kissed like that, like a teenager. There’s no plan to fuck her, no urgency. Just kissing.

Until Harry exclaims ‘EWW!’ and he comes barreling between them, telling Sirius not to eat Astrid, because he loves Astrid.

(-)

The second time they sleep together, it’s something for them, not for dynastic duty, and it makes all the difference. That, and the fact they know each other now, even if not well, but at least they’re comfortable, no longer perfect strangers.

He has the distinct impression the *ring* doesn’t like it.

“Don’t you want a second son?” Astrid asks him, after the fifth time they have sex.

Sirius always casts a charm to avoid pregnancy.

“I’m not in a hurry,” he says, after he thinks about it. Truth is, he never thought about a second child. He didn’t want the first one, even if now he’s absolutely in love with Orion.

He can barely handle Orion and Harry, let alone another baby.

And the deal was, Sirius marries and has a boy. That’s what he promised his grandfather. That’s what he agreed to.

He has a boy.

“Father thinks it’s important to have a second son,” she says. “He had two older brothers, and both died. He tried for another boy, after my brother was born, but gave up eventually.”

Regulus will have a daughter, the Healer assured them.

“We’ll see,” Sirius says, noncommittal. “Do you want another one?”

She, too, seems a tad overwhelmed. She’s only twenty, and she has to look after two children. Of course, there’s Kreacher to take care of them, and Dobby pops in often to tire Harry out when the kid has too much energy and neither Sirius nor Astrid are able to match it.

She shrugs. “I grew up in a large family. It wasn’t always fun, but my sisters and brother were always a comfort, too.”

Sirius noticed she’s particularly close with her youngest sister, letters exchanged between them weekly.

“We’ll see,” he repeats.

Now that she brought it up, Sirius is certain one day his grandfather will also mention it.

But really, Sirius can wait and give Regulus a chance to have a son, and then surely, that will be the end of it, and everyone will leave them alone.

“They’re breeding you like an animal,” Tom says, when Sirius falls asleep. “This isn’t the life you wanted.”

He’s lying on the floor of his run down flat, next to Sirius.

Tom is very casual, unlike Voldemort.

He’s imitating me, it occurs to Sirius. He copies Sirius’ attitude, his mannerism, even Sirius’ vocabulary.

“You don’t understand how these things work,” Sirius snaps at him. “I almost died in the war. Regulus could have easily died in it, too. And then our family would have perished. Two thousand year old legacy, gone in a generation.”

“You aways defend them so fiercely, even if they put shackles on you, even if they took over your life.”

He stretches, like a cat, turns on his side, looks at Sirius.

“If he was here, he wouldn’t allow for this,” he whispers. “He’d have saved you from this fate.”

Sirius stands, puts some distance between them when Tom leans in, too close.

“He told me to get married, too.”

“No. He said you’ll cave, that you’ll let your grandfather marry you off, that you’ll provide them with an heir. He *hated* it, but he was willing to let you, because he thought it would be dangerous to stand between you and your family. He was worried you’d pick them over him, so he considered it more prudent not to object to it. But *this*? A second child? And if it’s a girl, a third? Forth? Where will it end? No, he wouldn’t have allowed it. And he hoped you wouldn’t even marry, you know? He believed you when you promised you won’t, when you told him you won’t sleep with anyone else. He didn’t want to believe it, because he didn’t want to be disappointed when you eventually broke your promise, but he did believe. He always believed in you. What a fool.” Tom smiles, like a shark, still stretched on the floor. “Half a century, he didn’t trust anyone. Guarded, paranoid, alone. And then he met you and forgot all about caution. He forgot he can be hurt by those he allows too close.”

Tom stands, a fluid, elegant motion, quick as a cat.

Quick as a snake.

“And you did hurt him. You think you’re hurt? Poor Sirius,” he mocks. “Body and soul intact, lazying about your Manor, with your wife and children. You think you’re hurt?” he repeats ,and now he’s angry, brown eyes sparking red. “You don’t know what that truly means. You whine that you lost everything, but that’s a lie. I never had anything. He never had anything. We don’t even have a body. But you’re the one that’s hurt? When he’s suffering, alone, abandoned? He’s waiting for you, but you stay here, instead, praised stallion, doing your duty and moaning about it. You think he would have ever abandoned you?” Tom grabs him by the shirt, pulls him closer, their noses touch. “You think he’d have let you suffer, without a body, in pain, while he enjoyed his life?” Tom sneers, a sharp thing that cuts all the way inside Sirius. “A man missing parts of his soul, and yet he had more soul than you.”

Sirius pushes him away. “And if I help him? Then you’re back to nothing. You will lose the power you have now.”

“I was made to keep him safe.” Tom looks at Sirius with derision. “Because no one else would keep him safe. He never had anyone to look out for him. No father, mother, rich grandfather. *No one*. So he had to keep himself safe. He could only trust himself, and he was right. No one else can be trusted. You failed him. You fail him every second. And you have the audacity to think yourself a loyal man.”

(-)

Over time, in his dreams, Tom begs Sirius to touch him, to kiss him, to fuck him.

Voldemort would never beg, he wouldn’t act so wantonly. He never gripped so tight, either, the way Tom’s fingers dig into his flesh.

“I’m not him,” Tom says, what he always says. “I’m just lonely. I’ve never kissed anyone. I want to experience it.”

It takes so much effort to wake up, to rip himself away from his dream.

They are no mere dreams, he knows.

Sirius wakes, panting, rock hard, the ghost of Tom’s hands still on his hips.

‘I’m hard, too,’ Tom’s voice is clear as crystal in his head, even if Sirius is no longer sleeping. *‘Why do you deny us pleasure?’*

“Shut up,” Sirius snarls. “Shut up or I’ll throw the ring away!”

Tom falls silent, recedes back into the depths of Sirius’ consciousness.

He really should throw the ring away.

But he doesn’t want to. He never liked taking it off, but now...more than ever, Sirius needs it. He needs and wants Voldemort, and this is a Voldemort that can’t hurt anyone around him, that can only exist in Sirius’ dreams, that never killed James; a Voldemort he can control-

Can I, though? Sirius wonders, and his hand moves to his cock, almost of its own volition.

Sirius wrenches it away, flees from his room, hurries through the hallways until he’s knocking on Astrid’s door.

She answers it a couple of minutes later, hair dishevelled, blinking in confusion. “Has something happened? Is Orion-”

“He’s fine.” Sirius reaches out to her, tries his best to contain his impatience, to be gentle when he pulls her close to him.

He bends to kiss her, presses against her. “May I come in?”

She nods. “Of course.”

She’s warm and alive and breathing. When Sirius takes off her nightgown, he focuses on her breasts, on her soft belly, on everything that makes her different.

(-)

The Horcrux grows stronger and stronger; Sirius has days when he can’t recall where he’s been, even an hour previously.

Its influence diminishes only when Sirius is around Orion. Strangely, when he’s around Harry, the Horcrux seems *more* powerful.

(-)

It's an early afternoon, he's seated at his desk, and he knows he has to take the ring off, he knows he doesn't have much longer, that the Horcrux is gaining too much power, too quickly.

So Sirius tries removing it, and he slides it upwards, all the way to the second knuckle-

He blinks, and he's in Tom's flat again. His head throbs, he feels nauseous, disorientated at the change of scenery, from day to night, from his office to Tom's place.

Tom kneels before him, crying. "Don't abandon me," he begs. "Please, don't throw me away! I've been alone for so long, Sirius, in the dark, blind, deaf and cold. Please, please don't throw me away!"

Snap out of it, Sirius tells himself. *Wake up!*

He blinks, and he's in his office, collapsed near the desk and his chair.

It's frightening the ring has this level of control already, that it can control him even when he's not sleeping-

"Please!" He's back in the flat, before he knows it, Tom still kneeling, holding on to Sirius' legs, much like Harry does when he wants something. "I've been alone all my life. No one wanted me. No one ever wanted me! Not even him! He threw me away, too- Sirius!"

It breaks his heart, even as something weak and fading fast in his mind yells at him that it's all a trick, that it's just a dark artefact using everything it can to keep its hold of Sirius.

But-

He can't ignore it. It might be a Horcrux, but Voldemort is real, Tom Riddle was once real, and alone, and Sirius cannot abandon him.

It knows it, too, that is why it's using the word 'alone' so much, because it knows it's something that Sirius always associated with Voldemort, that it always hurt him to imagine him as a child, with no one in his corner.

"You have to stop," Sirius tells him. "You're too aggressive, you're taking too much."

"I'll be good," Tom begs. "Please! You won't even know I'm here anymore, I'll stay hidden, anything you want, just don't throw me away!"

Sirius kneels in front of him, and Tom is so quick, throwing his long arms around Sirius' neck, hiding his face in Sirius' shoulder.

"You'll possess me," Sirius says, so, so tired.

“No, no, I won’t! I promise! I’ll be good-“

“You’re lying,” he whispers.

Tom is an impression of Voldemort, an amalgamation of his traits and memories, but he’s not the real deal. He doesn’t lie as smoothly as Voldemort.

Maybe because he was too young when he made the Horcrux, or maybe it’s just that a Horcrux could never be as complex as a real human being. Whatever it is, Sirius sees through his lies.

But he can’t stay indifferent to Tom’s pain, his desperation as he hugs Sirius.

That is real, even if Tom isn’t. It’s Sirius’ pain and fear manifested through Tom, stolen by Tom, replicated to perfection, and Sirius cannot stay indifferent to it.

“Let me go.”

“Don’t-“

“I won’t throw you away, but I need you to let me go, now. If you don’t, I’ll pull myself out and then I will take the ring off. I’ll throw you into the fucking ocean.”

Tom draws back, and his eyes are clear, calculating, even as tears are drying on his face.

“You threw him away. He’s suffering, and you won’t help him. Is it not enough you abandoned him? Now you want to get rid of me, too? He gave me to you, trusted you with my safety, and now you’re thinking of betraying him again?”

“I didn’t betray-"

“I know your every thought, all your emotions. You cannot hide from me. I’m meant to absorb it all. And I did the same when he wore me. I saw his every thought, I absorbed every feeling you awoke inside him. His trust in you was unwavering. He didn’t doubt you for a second, when he decided to give me away, when he took me off and transferred me to you. He loved you.”

Tom’s eyes narrow. “Traitor,” he whispers, and he pushes Sirius, hard-

Sirius blinks, and he’s on his back, in his office. He’s shaking, and it takes several tries to stand up.

But it’s quiet, he feels alone, Tom retreating, diminishing his influence over Sirius.

He breathes easier, and he hadn’t realised it’s been hard to breathe lately. Yet the loneliness is worse than lack of air. Far, far worse.

(-)

He's having nightmares again; *nightmare*. The same one, on a loop.

He walks inside the Potter home, sees James, lies down beside him.

"I don't want to go upstairs," he begs James. "Please, I don't want to. Wake up. Help me. I can't go there."

But James says nothing, so Sirius goes.

He doesn't find Lily anymore, hadn't in a while.

Just Voldemort.

He has the nightmare every time he sleeps, every time he closes his eyes.

Most days, he doesn't have the energy to get out of bed, not even to see the boys.

(-)

James starts speaking, eventually, asking Sirius how can he love the man who killed him. He looks so furious, so disgusted-

Sirius flees.

Up the stairs.

Again, and again, and *again.*

Until one time, he's climbing, but instead of finding the caved roof and Voldemort dead, Sirius finds Tom.

"I know you banished me, but you need me," Tom says, and they're in his flat in Knockturn alley, Tom perched on his shabby desk, smoking.

Sirius is so grateful to see him. He hurries over, grabs Tom and hauls him into a hug.

Kreacher is calling his name from afar, saying breakfast is ready.

"No," Sirius says, so tired, holding on to Tom. "I can't."

"You need rest," Tom agrees. "Stay here. Sleep."

"Master!" Kreacher insists, waking Sirius, but Sirius doesn't want to wake up, doesn't want-

"I'll take it from here," Tom whispers. "You just rest."

The room shifts around him, and he's back in the cabin. He's playing the piano.

Voldemort is there, alive and well, and Sirius breathes. *It was all a nightmare.*

"Play something else," Voldemort asks.

Sirius has his back to him, but just feeling him there, feeling his gaze and attention on Sirius...it's so good.

Sirius plays.

In the distance, he hears himself speak, commanding Kreacher to leave him alone.

He has a brief second where he's standing in his bedroom at the manor, Kreacher peering up at him, worried, but then Sirius is back in the cabin, and Voldemort's hand is on his shoulder.

He keeps playing.

(-)

Heartwood peers at him from under bushy eyebrows. He came to check on Astrid, but he pulls Sirius aside. "You're losing weight," he says, with a deep frown. "Are you eating?"

Sirius shrugs, rubbing his eyes. He's so tired.

"Are you sleeping?"

"Quite a lot."

"I don't like what I'm seeing, Mr Black. Something's off. You were doing so well, but now… perhaps we cut the potions off too early."

*"*You know you don't need potions,*"* Tom says in his ear. *"*There's nothing wrong with you. I'll send him away.*"*

Sirius glances at the ring.

When he looks up to speak to Heartwood, the man is no longer in the living room. Sirius is no longer in the living room, but in the gardens, and it's already night outside.

He's lying on his back, staring at the stars.

"It's only him that can save you from me, Sirius. If you don't find him, I will take over completely, and eventually you'll die. You're getting weaker every day. He is fond of you- or, at least, he was. I'm sure he wants to keep you, and won't be pleased if I kill you. You have to find him!"

Tom is getting frustrated. He wants to go after Voldemort, but he doesn't know where Voldemort is.

He's trying to find him with astral magic, but even if he can command Sirius' body, even his mind, make Sirius forget, make him sleep, sleep so much, make him a stranger in his own flesh, Tom cannot command astral magic.

He's trying, Sirius thinks Tom has been trying for many nights, but the stars don't answer to his call, don't show him what he most wants.

"You have to ask them," Tom says. "Look for him! Show me where he is!"

"No," Sirius says.

"You'll die," Tom says, and he sounds desperate. "Your body can't hold both of us for much longer. We need to find him!"

Sirius would laugh if he could. "Astral magic would shatter you," he tells Tom. "You don't understand, because I don't understand what it does, either. But it's far stronger than you are."

"It's not stronger than I," Tom says, arrogant. "I was made by him. There's nothing stronger than him."

(-)

"Sirius? Sirius?"

Sirius wakes up, and he's in Harry's room, holding Harry, with no recollection of having done any of that.

His fingers are on Harry's scar.

Sirius snatches his hand back.

Harry looks at him, confused, but not scared.

No, it's Sirius that's terrified.

"I wasn't hurting him," Tom tells him, voice as clear as if he's in the room with them. "I wasn't!"

"Are you alright?" Sirius asks, checking him over.

"Yes," Harry says. "Are you? You are strange!"

"Did I scare you?"

Harry shakes his head. “No.”

He puts Harry back to bed. Harry looks a bit bigger than last Sirius remembers. He’s *grown*, and fuck, how long has it been?

“I wasn't hurting him,” Tom insists. He sounds excited. Which is odd, because Sirius plans on casting a nice Fiendfyre on the fucking ring. If he can’t pull the ring off, than he’ll cast Fiendfyre on himself. One way or another, the ring will be gone. He won’t risk Harry’s safety-

“No need for that. He is safe from me. He’s like me, don’t you see?”

Sirius freezes.

“You suspected it, deep down, you already put it together, but not consciously. I only wanted to check for myself. He’s a Horcrux.”

“Sirius?” Harry asks, when Sirius’ fingers tighten over his hand.

“No,” Sirius says. “No.”

“Yes! He’s a Horcrux! You think I wouldn’t recognise it? *You* recognised it. It’s perfect! Don’t you understand? You can bring him back! He won’t hurt the boy now. He’ll want to protect him, like he protected me.”

“He’s not a Horcrux!” Sirius snarls.

“Sirius?” Harry sits up in his crib and now he looks frightened.

Tom is right, Sirius felt Voldemort’s magic whenever he touched Harry’ scar. But- no. How can he believe it? Sweet, kind, loving Harry?

Tom is impatient, bristling inside Sirius’ head.

“Summon a snake. Any piece of his soul, of his magic, will carry the Gift, no matter the container.”

So Sirius does, he conjures a snake, and Harry isn’t scared of it. He’s curious, watching it slither in Sirius’ hand.

The snake hisses, agitated.

And Harry hisses *back.*

Tom makes a derisive noise. “He asked what its name is. Stupid child.”

“Harry, what did you say?” Sirius asks, heart in his throat.

Harry blinks up to him. “I asked for its name.”

“Snakes don’t understand the concept of names,” Tom says.

“But it doesn’t know what a name is,” Harry explains. “Sirius, you’re hurting it! Can’t you hear it? Please, it is in pain-”

Sirius flees from the room, the snake dissolving between his fingers.

And then he’s in Tom’s flat.

Tom smiles. “We can go after him, now. The boy is safe, isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Harry is possessed?” Sirius asks, though he can’t believe it. Harry is so kind, so- so James, and Lily, and *good*. No Horcrux would be able to feign that.

“No.”

“No? I’m barely holding you off, and I’m a grown wizard-”

“Obviously, he didn’t finish the ritual. It’s quite odd, his magic is there, stuck in the boy’s forehead, but it is not compelled. I don’t know why he’d do that, but clearly he died right after, so he didn’t have time to finish the ritual, to secure the container and give it direction.”

Sirius blinks. Tom frowns.

And then: “He didn’t mean to do it,” he says.

They *both* say it, at the same time.

Sirius spends the night in the library, pouring over the books he has on Horcruxes, with Tom providing running commentary inside his head.

There’s no information about this. About turning a living being into a Horcrux.

But Sirius reads again a paragraph he’d read before, *years* before, about how unstable and volatile someone’s soul- someone’s magic, according to the text- can become after making a Horcrux. How easily ripped apart.

It’s the only explanation he can fathom.

When the killing curse rebounded, killing Voldemort’s body, his soul, unstable, already crippled, already used to splitting, cracked once more, and a piece lodged itself inside Harry.

(-)

Astrid is pregnant, visibly so, and Sirius is not sure when that happened.

Must have been during one of those late night visits, when he was so desperate to escape Tom, he didn’t remember to cast the charm.

Everything is fuzzy. He has trouble remembering what he did, and when.

Surely, he can't go on much longer. Tom kept promising him he'll die, soon. But here he is, still going.

(-)

"You suicidal fool!" Tom is upset with him. He's agitated.

"You knew this about me from the moment I put you back on," Sirius tells him, gently. He feels good in the dream. That's the only time he feels good. He's lying on Tom's small, uncomfortable bed. "But you didn't understand it, did you? Even if you knew. You can't really understand not wanting to live anymore."

Tom can't. He crawls into bed with Sirius, and it's so small, they have to lie side by side to fit, limbs interwind.

But it's not the same as it was with Voldemort. Sirius doesn't get what he wants from it.

Tom doesn't have Voldemort's confidence, the power to make Sirius feel safe.

Tom is afraid. Angry. Desperate.

"I can't help it!" Tom snarls, but pushes his body into Sirius. "I wish I was him, too, but I don't know how. I wasn't made for it."

"It's alright." Sirius hugs him. It's like hugging Harry, like holding Orion. It awakes a paternal side of Sirius, holding this very tall broken boy, made only of fractured memories and dark magic.

He always felt so very protective of Tom, even back when Tom was dormant, only a ring.

"I felt that," Tom whispers. "When he gave me to you, I felt- it was different. I wasn't awake yet, not with him in power, but even so, I could feel you. I liked you. But I missed him. I wanted back to him. I always want him. I need him."

"I know." Sirius remembers the ring reacting whenever he touched Voldemort.

He remembers telling Voldemort the ring wants back to him.

"You're imagining it," Voldemort said.

Sirius knows how it feels to want Voldemort, to miss him. He hugs Tom tighter.

"Then let us find him."

“You don’t understand,” Sirius says. Tom sees everything, knows everything, but he just can’t *understand* some things. “He’s dead. Even if I bring him back, he’d still be dead. The man I trusted is gone. He died when he betrayed me.”

“You betrayed him!”

“We turned on each other,” Sirius allows. “Whatever we had is broken. I can never have that back, even if he were to have a body again. It won’t be him. I loved a lie.”

“No, no! He didn’t lie to you! He- he made a mistake,” Tom whispers. “But he was himself with you. He wasn’t a lie. He loved you! The way he can love.”

“What do you know of love, Tom? You’re just an animated dark artefact.”

Tom says nothing for a while. “I know. I - I feel what you feel. I know love and loss and pain. And I felt what he felt, when he wore me. I knew his every thought, his every memory.” Tom shudders. “It wasn’t pleasant. He didn’t know happiness until he met you.”

Sirius can’t ever be sure how much of what Tom is saying is true, what is a lie-

“I’m not lying!”

It’s worse if Tom is telling the truth. It’s even more tragic that way.

“I will drain you completely, soon,” Tom warns. “Your body can’t sustain us both for much longer. You’ll get your wish, you’ll die, and only I will remain. I will find him, eventually. I will save him. You’d have died for nothing.”

“You won’t be able to parade around as me,” Sirius tells him. Tom can’t even properly recreate Voldemort, and he’s a part of Voldemort.

His family may stand back for now, insulted Sirius moved out of Grimmauld and he’s refusing to come back. They stopped visiting him, they think Sirius is rebelling, angry with them for drugging him and marrying him off, but eventually one of them will reach out and Tom won’t be able to fool them.

Even Astrid, who barely knows him, seems to understand something is going on.

“I won’t hang around enough for them to find me,” Tom says. “I’ll leave as soon as you’re gone.”

“Will you remember me? If you get to him, if you revive him, and he wears you again, will he know …this?”

“I don’t know,” Tom whispers. “I- I don’t know.”

“Tell him Harry is a Horcrux, then. Before you help him.”

“We could tell him. You could tell him. And-”

“I don’t want to see him. I don’t want anything to do with him.”

Tom looks at him, cups his face. “Then why do you put me on? Why did you allow me to get so strong. You do want him-”

“I do. But it would be too painful. I can’t.”

I’ve done my duty, Sirius thinks. *I gave my family an heir. I made sure Harry will be safe. I made Regulus marry.*

He did what his father wanted, he saved Harry, like James wanted.

Sirius can’t do more. He doesn’t want to. He can’t stand knowing Voldemort is suffering somewhere, that he’s within Sirius’ reach, but Sirius hates him too much to help him.

He can’t stand knowing Bella is suffering, too, and Sirius could make it all better.

“Let me see where he is,” Tom begs. “Die, if you insist, but let me know where he is, first. Please.”

“Alright.” Sirius agrees, and when he opens his eyes, he’s in the garden, staring at the sky.

“Show me,” he demands. “Lead me to him.”

He’s free as soon as soon as he wills the magic inside him to reach out to the stars.

He hates it. He knew, deep down, that Tom’s power will be shattered if he uses astral magic. Which is why he refused so adamantly.

It’s so *lonely*.

Dark, and cold, and just him. Freedom is unbearable. It’s been so since Azkaban.

The potions dimmed the empty gap inside him for a while, then Tom filled it, but it never went away.

He wants to die, is the sad reality of it. He wished it since he saw Voldemort’s body on the floor, and the desire never went away, even when masked by external influences.

It came back with a vengeance when Sirius went back to the cabin.

And now, alone in the sky, without his body, without Tom or any potion, Sirius feels it so *deeply*, a burning wish as vast as the universe around him.

The only thing he wants more than dying, is Voldemort.

So the stars lead Sirius to him. Or *try* to.

Sirius feels he’ll rip apart, even if he doesn’t have a body. He feels tossed around, pulled into several different directions.

In the past, he'd have gotten scared. He'd have tried to flee, he'd have begged to be return to his body.

But, as it is, Sirius accepts the pain, the confusion, the possibility of getting lost among the stars and never returning to his body.

He's lost, already, no matter what he does.

He's been adrift since that Samhain night.

He doesn't panic. He welcomes whatever may happen.

"You have to trust it," Voldemort taught him, patiently walking Sirius through managing a blood gift no one else in the world could access. *"You have to respect it. Do not fear it."*

Just like that, the ripping sensations disappears. The universe stops spinning.

Sirius still feels the pull, in opposite directions, and he chooses the closest destination.

He sees his own Manor, his body lying on the ground.

And then he follows a different path, and he's looking down at Gringotts.

He's pulled to Malfoy Manor, next.

And then to the cave where Kreacher took him.

He barley glimpses it, before he's above Hogwarts.

All brief visions, before Sirius is taken further away. Further than he'd ever been.

So far.

An unfamiliar forest lays underneath him. The pull is the strongest there, as the magic he wields finally decides this is where Voldemort is, having been confused earlier.

Sirius watches the forest with dread. With pity. With so much sorrow.

He understands.

He knows why he saw the cave, his manor. It's because the Horcruxes are there.

So there must be more of them at Gringotts, Malfoy Manor and Hogwarts.

And in this forest, far, far away, where the magic is strongest- Voldemort is here, somewhere.

This does frighten him; death doesn't, but this- he doesn't want to see Voldemort as he is now, doesn't want to imagine what is left of him.

He can't bear to think of all those Horcruxes. Two were bad enough, heartbreaking enough, but so many? How is that even possible?

He tries to retreat, to return to his body, but he can't. He's too far away. He panics, he struggles, and there's no one to guide him, no one to call his name, no one to help.

And then he *falls*.

Like in the past, above his father's grave. He falls, he's *burning*, speed and darkness-

It stops. He's above his Manor again, staring down at the rose garden. But his body isn't waiting for him there.

Everything is clear, clearer than it's ever been while projecting.

A man is there, instead. A man and a boy. They're both lounging on a blanket.

Sirius recognises them instantly.

"She'll hate me," his father says, and Sirius hears him so clearly, can almost feel his warmth, he's so *close*. "Father will hate it."

"Get used to it," old Sirius says. He's so much younger than he remembers him, hair still dark. And so long, almost to his waist. "Heads of House are always hated."

His father turns his head, raises an eyebrow. "I don't hate you."

Old Sirius scoffs. "We must make decisions that aren't terribly popular, but necessary for the family."

His father is so, *so* young. He must still be attending Hogwarts.

"But this isn't for the family. This is for me. It's selfish. I want her."

The old man shrugs. "Take her, then."

"So, you'll allow it? You'll support me? Father won't."

Old Sirius turns to look at Orion. "If you take Walburga for a wife, I will name you my heir."

Orion straightens. "No. Father is your heir. You can't bypass him. It's not right-"

Old Sirius slaps him over the head. "Don't tell me how to manage my family. Arcturus is too dutiful, too obedient. He's forty, and he's still waiting for permission. I worried you'd be the same, but finally you're showing some independent thinking."

"You didn't let us have independent thoughts-"

Old Sirius slaps him again.

Sirius gets angry. How dare he strike his father?

But Orion doesn't seem bothered.

"*You didn't let us*," the old man mocks. "Those that bend to me aren't worthy of succeeding me. In fact, until just now, I was considering making Walburga my heir. She's the only one with enough spine to mouth off to me." He laughs. "Imagine that, a woman as Head of House."

Orion rubs his temples.

"No wonder you're infatuated with her. With that spirit of hers…"

"She'll say 'no'," Orion whispers. He looks worried. "I keep trying to show her I want to marry her, but she either doesn't get my meaning, or she's ignoring it on purpose. She thinks I'm some child."

"You are a child. She'll stop treating you as a child when you star acting like a man. You're bending backwards to please her, you cave to her every whim- she doesn't think you a child, she thinks you a dog, there to serve her."

"How did you convince grandmother to marry you?"

"Convinced her? Ha! No one can convince Hesper of anything. I was courting her cousin, when she came up to me and told me I'd be better off marrying her, instead."

"What cousin?"

"Gods know. I forgot her name. One of those Lestrenge women. I think she died in childbirth." He shrugs. "Hesper was right, I was better off with her, after all. Gave me three heathy children and many headaches, on top."

Orion smiles. "She says I should ask Walburga, first-"

"Ask, then. Whatever good it will do you. She'll refuse, because she likes to be contrary. It's her disposition, to reject everything just because she can. A Black, through and through. Why waste your breath? I already gave you permission. My word is law. Arcturus can rage at it, she can throw a tantrum, but it's done already. You can inform her, or I will."

"No," Sirius says. "No. Father, just ask her, first!"

The old man freezes. *"What?"*

"I didn't say anything." Orion frowns at him.

"Father." Sirius tries touching him. "Please, ask her nicely, don't force her!"

Old Sirius stands, abruptly. And then Sirius *feels* the weight of his gaze on him. Somehow. Even if he has no body, the old man sees him.

"Grandfather?" Orion asks.

"Who are you?" the old man demands.

“Have you been drinking again?”

“Shut up, Orion!”

“I’m Sirius.”

They look at each other. Across time, and stars, and death.

“I’m lost,” Sirius tells him. “I don’t think I should be here. But I don’t know how to get back. You died. There was no one left to teach me these things.”

The old man closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, they’re pure white.

“You’re named after me, I take it,” his voice comes, even if his mouth doesn’t move. Sirius hears him, *feels* him now, feels his magic, in a different way.

“Obviously. Mother named me after you, though I’m not sure why, since you just agreed to marry her off without her consent!”

They’re getting further away from the Manor, where Orion keeps calling for his grandfather, asking if he’s alright.

The Manor gets smaller, smaller, until there’s nothing left. Only darkness, the vastness of space.

“Seems I made the right choice, allowing them to marry, since you’re here with me,” the old man says. Sirius no longer sees him, but he hears him clearly, he feels him so close.

“Well, I might die here. I don’t know how to get back. I didn’t think I could - I don’t know what this is. I might be dead already, and just imagining it. I projected too far.”

“I see we haven’t gotten less dramatic. Though, being Walburga’s son, I suppose the chances were slim for a sensible child.”

“My brother is sensible,” Sirius spits out. “Not that you ever cared about him. You didn’t even remember his name when you were still alive. You only ever remember mine, because I was like you.”

“But I died before I could train you.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that. It’s been a joy navigating this on my own.”

“You’re lucky I died; I wouldn’t have allowed you to speak to me in this manner.”

“It would have been fun seeing you trying to stop me.”

“Let’s see about sending you back where you belong, before you enrage me enough and I leave you for dead.”

“I don’t mind dying,” Sirius says. In fact, he rather likes it. It’s peaceful here. He saw his father.

“Don’t project when you’re suicidal. You’ll lose control, fast. Learned that the hard way, myself.”

“I’ve lost control before, but I didn’t end up in the- in the past?”

“Time, as you understand it, is a human concept, earthbound. Now shut up, and let me focus, child. Otherwise, you truly will die.”

“I don’t mind-”

Sirius feels as if he’s being *shoved*- as if something is sitting on his chest, and he can’t breathe.

He sits up, gasping for air, in his own body.

‘What happened?’ Tom asks.

“That explains why you’re suicidal,” his great grandfather says, and Sirius flinches, looks around, but he can’t see anything.

He closes his eyes, like a child, trying to process everything. Tom is taking over again, but he’s confused, too-

“What is that? On your finger? Whatever it is, take it off. It’s poisoning you.”

‘Can you hear him? Tom, can you hear him?’

‘Hear who?’

“Take the damn thing off, boy! Now!”

He feels the shove again, and this time he has a body to feel it with. It sends Sirius flying backwards.

“Take it off!”

‘What is happe-’ Tom starts to say but Sirius-

He takes the ring off.

Immediately, he feels exhausted. Dizzy. He lets go of the ring, and it falls in the grass.

“What an idiot,” his great grandfather says. His presence is around, Sirius can sense it, but not pinpoint it. “And what has happened to the garden? Tell Tessuth to trim it, for Merlin’s sake. This is unacceptable. Where are Hesper’s favourite blue roses?”

Sirius breathes in, out, every bone in his body aching. He feels so incredibly week.

Everything Tom kept at bay returns. All the misery, the pain, the loneliness, the memories-

Orion.

Sirius opens his eyes. His son.

He tries standing. He can't. He crawls.

"Not even a thank you. Entitled little shit. You take after your father, then. Best I return to him, before he works himself into a panic. Do try not to get *lost* again, child."

Sirius manages the strength to kneel. He's so dizzy. *Gods, when was the last time I ate? How long did he wear the ring for?*

He can't remember. He can't-

Just get to Orion and Harry.

Somehow, Sirius makes it, though he collapses on the stairs a few times.

He reaches the nursery, and he finds both boys there, alive and well.

Sirius walks to the nearest room, a dusty one, collapses again.

"Kreacher?"

"Master?"

"Bella. I need Bella."

"Is it Master? Or is it the other one?"

"It's me. Bring Bella here!"

"Master Cygnus watches her closely-"

"You can trick him! Bring her!"

(-)

She stares at him, blinking fast, trying to focus. But even drugged as she is, as confused, as soon as Kreacher brought her, and she saw Sirius on the floor, she immediately knelt at his side, took his head in her lap.

She listened, as he gasped through the story.

"I haven't heard of a human Horcrux," she says, slowly.

“He’s a Horcrux. I haven’t heard of it, either, but Harry is a Horcrux. He can speak Parseltongue!”

Bella keeps staring.

“I need you to check on Astrid. I don’t even remember what- I can’t remember if I hurt her, if I did anything to her. You have to check on her. Bella! Please!”

She blinks again. “I’m not leaving you alone. You’re not well.”

It takes a lot of convincing. His mouth is dry, even if Kreacher keeps bringing him water. He threw up a couple of times, just green bile.

He’s shivering, he’s so cold, but he needs to know how Astrid is doing.

Eventually, Bella listens to him and after she and Kreacher help him get into the bed, she goes after Astrid.

Sirius falls unconscious, dark, terrible shapes trying to consume him-

Bella shakes him awake. “She’s fine. She’s sleeping. She either got fat, or she’s pregnant again?”

Fuck.

Yes, she’s pregnant, he remembers, vaguely.

But he can’t remember how she got pregnant.

Fuck.

“Did she look-” Scared? Injured.

“She looks fine.” Bella crawls into bed with him. “We need rest. I need to be able to think.” She hugs him. “Don’t be scared. I’m not sure what is happening, but I’m here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

He falls unconscious again.

(-)

It takes months for Sirius to get better, to regain weight he lost. *Again.*

It takes months for Bella to get better, too. She has terrible withdrawals, but when Hartwood suggests she slowly gets off the potions, that she continues taking them, only less and less, she refuses.

“Never again.”

Cygnus doesn’t understand why Sirius prohibits him from taking Bella back home, from giving her potions. He doesn’t understand why Bella suddenly doesn’t want to kill Harry or run after Voldemort.

Astrid seems alright. She’s distant, as she was at the beginning of their marriage, she’s cautious, but she doesn’t look as if Sirius did anything to her.

He hopes he mostly ignored her, acted oddly.

Bella is the one that retrieves the ring from the garden, locks it inside a box, and buries it under the rose bushes.

“Why did you wear it? For so long?” she asked, during the first *hellish* week after it all ended.

“Because I don’t know how to live without him, but I wouldn’t be able to live with him, either, after what he did to me.”

She doesn’t ask him to save Voldemort. She doesn’t speak about going after him anymore.

They heal together, side by side. “I need you,” Sirius keeps telling her, in the dead of night. “If I’m to live again, I need you. You’re the only thing I have left.”

He has his children, but Sirius can’t force himself to live just for them. Deep inside, he thinks they’d be better off without him, anyway.

But Bella- Bella is his soulmate. They can live for each other.

“I’m here,” she answers, always. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I saw great grandfather. He was so much worse than what I remembered,” he says, though he’s told her this already. But it’s fine. They keep telling each other the same things, out of the blue.

She snorts. “He always favoured you. And me. But yes, you were too young to know him properly. He was a mean old bastard. When he first saw Narcissa, he said to get rid of her, because he didn’t like her hair colour. Uncle Orion said he didn’t mean it, that he was drunk, and to pay him no mind, but I don’t think he was joking. Father was terrified of him. Arcturus, too. Uncle Alphard never showed up when he was around. Luckily, I think the old man forgot Alphard existed. Only Orion, Walburga and Melania could deal with him, really. In the last months he was alive, he kept calling me Hesper.”

“I wonder what she was like.” What kind of woman put up with that man?

“She died before I was born,” Bella answers. “But I hear she was just as vicious as he was.”

Elara is born, and Sirius and Bella are just well enough that they can go to Grimmauld and be there for Regulus.

“Merlin, you look like shit,” Regulus says, as they wait downstairs. “What happened to you? You were getting so much better last I saw you. Every time I leave for a new semester, something happens to you!”

His mother yells at Astrid that she isn’t taking care of Sirius, and *‘how could you let him get this bad?’*. Apparently Sirius, at some point, wrote to his mother to tell her he doesn’t want to see her. Sirius has no memory of writing that, it was Tom, but his mother blames Astrid and her ‘influence’ for it. Thankfully, his mother is more preoccupied with Isadora and the birth, so she only screams at Sirius and Astrid for a little while.

“You’re coming back home,” she informs Sirius, when Regulus holds his daughter for the first time. “Or I’m coming to live at the Manor. You’re not getting out of my sight again!”

Sirius moves back to Grimmauld.

Bella moves in with Narcissa, to Lucius’ displeasure. She’s not legally allowed to return to Lestrange Manor, and she refuses to go back to her parents’ house.

She’s also not allowed a wand, but Druella gives Bella her own wand, even if Cygnus rages about it.

Cygnus has Bella’s actual wand, but that one has a trace on it, easily detected, so they don’t risk it.

Harry easily forgets Sirius acting strange for a while. Orion obviously doesn’t remember it at all.

Astrid seems more at ease once they return to Grimmauld. Sirius swears to himself he’ll fix whatever tentative thing he broke between them.

He throws himself into raising Harry and Orion, he visits his grandfather daily, goes over mountains of papers, learns how to be a proper Head of House. He takes Astrid out for dinner, every night. He keeps busy, at all times.

When his in-laws come, as Astrid’s due date approaches, Sirius makes an effort to get to know them.

And when his second son is born, as they give him to Sirius to hold, Sirius swears to himself he’s done being a baby himself. That he won’t ever fuck up again, won’t mop around, feeling sorry for himself.

He names the boy Marvolo. It does bring some sort of closure.

“Is that a lesser known star?” Astrid asks, in a whisper, as to not disturb the boy.

“No,” Sirius whispers back. “He was a man I knew. He died in the war.” He kisses his son’s forehead. “It’s hard to accept it, but I have to make peace with it.”

His mother and grandfather hate the name. *Good.*

“I won’t be your puppet,” Sirius tells them. “I’m grateful you helped me when I needed you the most, I know you want the best for me, but I’m not going to do what you want, without question. I’m done with that.”

Slowly, Sirius takes control back from them.

Despotic as old Sirius had been, he was right. He who leads the family, does as he pleases, doesn’t obey blindly.

Old Sirius did what he wanted, his father led the family the way he wanted, and now it’s Sirius’ turn.

He always felt so trapped by his family, he always associated them with loss of freedom, but he finally understands he’s the one in control now. That his word is law.

(-)

Sirius finds out his mother was arrested, when he was arrested. That she attacked the Hit Wizards, when he fell, that she was disarmed, but she still tried her best to inflict damage, and half the team were trying to subdue her, while the other half were trying to catch Kreacher who was simultaneously trying to protect Sirius’ wand, like he ordered, and also Sirius’ mother. She only spent two days in a Ministry holding cell before Pollux got her out, but that's two days too many.

Sirius starts making a list of people he needs to kill. He asks Lucius for the names of all the Hit Wizards, since he only knew about five of them, and then he dutifully writes them down.

Peter, he writes under them. He scratches the name instantly, and writes Pettigrew, instead.

Peter is dead already. He died the night James died. Sirius mourned him, too. Only Pettigrew, the traitor, remains.

Robards, he writes. He tortured Sirius in Azkaban, but that’s not his main issue with the man. No. He thinks he hurt Bella, too.

Karkaroff, he adds, after some consideration. Karkaroff asked for a trial, after Voldemort fell, and named so many Death Eaters, including Bellatrix. Even if she was arrested already, he spoke her name.

It’s not just revenge, for his mother, Bella, and himself. No.

It’s protection, for his sons, for Harry.

After they dared arrest a Black, *three* Blacks, after they were betrayed, Sirius needs to remind the world that Blacks are supposed to be untouchable. That if a Black is hurt, the price will be paid in blood.

No one arrested Blacks while his father lived. No one arrested Blacks when old Sirius was alive.

Sirius begins his campaign to restore their reputation by going to Rita.

He waits for her outside her home. When she sees him, she tries to flee, but he catches her.

She's still beautiful. Despite everything, despite all the articles, Sirius likes her, likes her viciousness, her independence, her nerve.

But what Sirius likes doesn't matter.

"Write one single bad word about me or my family, and that will be the last thing you'll ever write," Sirius tells her, pinning her against the wall. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

Rita nods, her perfectly arranged, flawless blond curls bouncing around her head. She started wearing glasses, green, stylish- they fall off her face.

Sirius lets her go, steps back. "I shouldn't have stolen your armchair," he admits. "Allow me to buy you another, and let us forget our old dispute."

She nods, again, a little relieved now that Sirius isn't in her space.

He Apparates away.

He sends a note to Gringotts, ordering gold be transferred to her account. It's enough to buy Rita a small house, not just an armchair.

He's not so nice to the other journalists. Lucius tells him who wrote unflattering articles about him, when he was locked up. Lucius has their addresses, because he paid them a visit himself- well, Abraxas sent someone to pay them a visit.

"They are too insignificant to warrant a personal visit," Lucius advises. "We don't lower ourselves to their levels. Also, we don't want proof that involves us directly, in case they complain to the Aurors. Send someone else to talk to them."

Sirius sends Greyback. He's on the run, always moving across the United Kingdom, but Sirius finds him, anyway. He doesn't even use astral magic, he goes about it the old fashioned way, because it gives him an excuse to turn into Padfoot, track him like that.

"And what makes you think I'll do your dirty work, Black?"

He did plenty of dirty work for Voldemort, but it goes without saying, Sirius is no Voldemort.

"I have no use of gold," Greyback says, before Sirius can offer it.

"I will fulfil the promise Voldemort made you," Sirius says. "Not right now, I need to… convince my fellow purebloods, but I will soon make sure you have a safe place for your pack, where no one will bother you. I give you my word."

“And what is your word worth, dog?” Greyback enquires.

The entire pack stares at him, silently.

“You’ll find out. But, first, do your part.”

Greyback does his part.

Soon enough, in a matter of months, all journalists, editors, photographers, they all know to mind their words where the Black family is concerned.

(-)

Harry is a dutiful and caring older brother. Proud, too. He always brags to Draco about Orion and Marvolo. He looks more like James with every passing day; but he’s milder than James had been, less rambunctious. Could be Lily’s influence, or could be Astrid’s, that always reminds him to ‘act like a gentleman’.

Orion is exactly how Sirius imagined he would be. Which is odd, because he never imagined having a child, but somehow now that he has him, he just knows this is what he expected, deep inside. He laughs loudly, gets angry rapidly, and is extremely jealous. He’s jealous of Marvolo, whenever Astrid holds the baby. He’s jealous of Harry, whenever Sirius pays Harry more attention. When he starts walking, he keeps the elves very busy. He’s brave, curious, and nothing fascinates him more than the stars.

“That’s you,” Sirius teaches him, at night, showing him the constellation that shares his name. Orion is far too young to see the hunter in the sky, but he easily recognises Sirius.

“Daddy!” he says, so happy, smiling wildly, and he points to the star.

He looks like a Black, with Sirius’ eyes, and growing into mostly Black features. But one can see Astrid in his face, if one looks close enough. Well, Sirius’ mother claims she can’t see anything, but it’s just her.

Marvolo looks more like Astrid than Sirius. He has the trademark grey eyes, and both Astrid and Sirius have black hair, but Marvolo does favour his mother.

He desperately tries to keep up with Orion and Harry, crawling after them, and he cries unconsolably when he’s left behind, though Harry rarely leaves him behind, carrying him around the house, or the gardens. Marvolo’s first word is ‘mama’, and the second is Harry, or, well, a sound that is meant to be Harry.

They make Sirius happy. To see them grow, develop personalities, become little humans- it’s so precious.

Slowly, Sirius' desire to die goes away, and only because he wants to be around his boys, wants to get to know them, wants to be there to see them experience the world for the first time.

He wants to protect them, to shield them, to always keep them safe. He wants them to know they're not alone, that Sirius will take care of them.

Harry mostly calls him Sirius, when talking to him, but he always refers to Sirius as 'father' when speaking to others. It's the same for Astrid.

Sirius still tells him about James, often, the pictures are there, in Harry's room, but even if he sometimes feels he's stealing something from James when Harry refers to Sirius as 'father', he's not about to stop Harry from doing it.

He takes Harry to James' grave when Harry is five. It's the first time for both of them.

Sirius would cry, if he were alone, but he swore to himself his sons will never see him weak. So he doesn't cry. He helps Harry put flowers on the grave, for Lily, and a toy snitch, for James.

"He was a Chaser," Sirius tells Harry. "The best one in the world. And he'd be so proud to see what a talented Seeker you are."

Harry truly is a wonder on a broom, even a children model. Sometimes Draco, talented himself, cries in frustration, because Harry always catches the toy snitch first.

"When I will win my first game," Harry says, "I will win it for you. And," he looks at the grave. "And for James, too. Because he was your best friend and you love him so much!"

Harry speaks enthusiastically about his future career, how he will be a Quidditch captain, and it helps; it's easier to stand above James' grave, with Harry chatting beside him.

Sirius knows James and Lily would like the type of person Harry is becoming; he knows that, wherever they are, they're smiling seeing their son healthy, happy, and loved.

It's his only consolation.

(-)

Kreacher wakes Sirius up one night, little hands shaking, voice high with despair, to inform him he found Mistress Walburga collapsed on the floor and she isn't responding.

When Sirius rushes to her room, the image is far worse than finding James or Voldemort crumpled to the floor.

His mother is in her nightgown, and she looks so frail, her lips are bluish, and she weights almost nothing when Sirius lifts her and Apparates her to St Mungo.

He doesn't leave her side as the Healers work on her, and no one dares suggest he should depart.

"Her heart gave out," the Head Healer says, once she's stable, and Sirius can sit beside her, holding her hand in his own.

Her fingers, always long, are so thin, skeletal. Sirius remembers that hand when it was young, when her nails were long and painted beautifully, when gems adorned them.

Now her nails are clear, and she wears no jewellery but her wedding ring, the diamond so heavy it needed to be charmed not to fall off.

"The damage was extensive; if you'd have delayed bringing her even a few more moments, it would have been too late. Alas, she will recover, but she needs to spend some nights here. She'll mostly stay asleep, as the potions and charms heal her brain and heart; she won't know what is happening, Mr Black. You can visit, but she won't be able to-"

"Shut up" Sirius snarls and no one else suggests he should leave her room.

Regulus comes and goes, sitting on her other side, joining Sirius for a silent vigil, but departing often, returning to Grimmauld to check on the children and the wives.

Cygnus comes once, places a kiss on her forehead, a gentle caress to her face, before departing.

Narcissa pops in often, making sure Sirius drinks some water; she even manages to feed him at some point.

His grandfather doesn't show up, but Sirius didn't expect him to; the Head Healer mentions to Sirius he's in contact with Arcturus, whenever he comes to administer a new potion, or check on her progress.

She wakes some thirty hours after she collapsed, in the dead of the night, her fingers twitching in Sirius' hand. He hadn't let go of her.

"Orion?" she asks, voice small and confused, the sole candle lit in the room casting shadows over her, making her seem so tiny in the bed. "What happened-"

"You'll be alright," Sirius says, so grateful to see her eyes again. He bends and kisses her forehead. "Don't be scared. You were ill, but now you're on the mend."

"You're here; I'm not scared." She smiles, softly, her fingers tighten over his own for a second. "But the boys- who is looking after them? You didn't leave them alone with Arcturus, did you? He's too rough with Sirius, and he frightens Regulus-"

"Shh, don't worry."

“I’m tired.”

“Rest.” He kisses her forehead again. “I’ll be right here. You’ll be alright.”

“Mhh.” Her eyes close again. “Remind Kreacher that Sirius only falls asleep if you tell him a story. And Regulus can’t have cow milk, he gets a rash- only goat-”

“Shh. Everything is fine. Sleep.”

“I had an awful dream. You were dead and everything went to hell after that.” She squeezes his hand harder. “Don’t leave me.”

(-)

She wakes up again after another ten hours. She looks far more aware.

“You had a heart attack,” Sirius informs her. “But you’re good now. The Healers say you’re almost back to normal.”

“A heart-” She narrows her eyes. “*Nonsense*!”

Sirius smiles. There’s his mother.

Regulus comes in just some seconds later. He smiles widely, as he hadn’t since he’d been a child.

“Mum!” he rushes over to her other side, takes her other hand.

“Why are you both here?” she scolds them. “Who’s looking over the children?”

“Their mothers,” Sirius says, with a raised eyebrow.

She scowls. “Poor Harry, he’s especially sensitive. I hope you didn’t tell him I fell ill.”

Sirius has no idea what the children know or don’t know.

“They’re all just waiting for you to come home,” Regulus informs her. “Orion feels so guilty because he screamed at you at dinner that night.”

She scoffs.

Regulus shakes his head. “Gods, I haven’t seen your shoulders in twenty years, at least. Or your hair down!”

It’s only then that she looks down on herself and notices she’s in her nightgown.

Heart attack or not, she starts screaming at them, demanding they go around and Obliviate all who saw her in this state.

Narcissa brings her a robe, later on, and Sirius helps her put it on, once they're alone again. He braids her hair, too, how she likes it, pulled back, and pinned around her head.

They keep her in the hospital for three more nights, and they both terrorise the poor Healers and nurses. She refuses the food, only eats what Kreacher brings over.

She terrorises Sirius, too. The two of them were never meant to be closed in a small room for so many days, but he's so thankful she is alive to scream at him, that he can't help but smile through the insults.

Finally, they let her go, giving her a special tonic she's supposed to take daily, for the rest of her life.

They have no more recommendations, swearing up and down the tonic would prevent this from happening again, sweating under Sirius' glare when he tells them they better be right or they'll have to answer to him.

"She only needs to take the tonic," the Head Healer promises. "And, it would do her good to take walks, in nature, daily."

"She's too young for this," Sirius maintains, because she is! She's over sixty, but that's *nothing* for a witch.

"Sometimes, if one lives through too many…stressful events, it can leave an impact on the heart."

(-)

Sirius takes her on her walks, daily. She bitches and moans for the first few days, but eventually they grow on her, as they stroll leisurely through the gardens of Black Manor.

Sirius often thinks what would have happened if he weren't home the night she collapsed.

If he'd died in the war, or if his grandfather hadn't taken him out of Azkaban.

If Regulus wouldn't have been home, if he'd been arrested during the war, too.

If Kreacher was the only one there to find her, not knowing what to do.

It keeps him awake at night.

"I'm going to need you to live forever," he tells her, as they pass by a small lake.

She rolls her eyes, but when she turns and see his face, she softens. “I’ll do my best,” she promises, with a pat on his back.

“Why did you name me Sirius?” he asks, on a different day.

It’s unusual for a woman to name the Heir to a family, especially a family such as theirs.

“Sirius shone brightly the night you were born.” She smiles. “But, truth is, I named you Sirius months before you were born.”

She nestles closer into him, as they walk, her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“No one believed you would live. I lost seven children before you. No one believed in me, or in my capability to deliver a son for the family. Orion didn’t even want to try anymore. He was worried so many pregnancies might weaken me, make me ill. He went around trying to convince Cygnus should try again, for a boy, pestering Alphard into marrying. He was so mad with them, for failing him, for not doing their duty. He was never mad with me, though, but the rest of the family was.”

“Fucking pricks, the lot of them,” Sirius mutters.

“Except the old man,” she adds. “Orion never blamed me, would have rather remained heirless than go through all that loss over and over, he couldn’t bear to witness it any longer, so when I was pregnant with you, he fled. He was working, he was abroad, he was anywhere but home. And I was put on bed rest; I couldn’t get out of my room. It was terribly lonely, and no one would come see me. No one but old Sirius. He was there every day, drunk and merry, assuring me I would have a son. He never doubted me, even after all the previous miscarriages. And- well, he did seem to know things, that old terror. Because of his astral magic that he never spoke about, this mysterious thing we didn’t understand. But he was adamant I would have not one, but two sons.” She laughs. “He even said one would be a dramatic, reckless fool, and the other would be sensible. It gave me hope. He stayed with me in that room, and eventually he made Orion, stay, too. Orion didn’t want to become attached again, but he rarely disobeyed the old man, so towards the end, he would visit me, with that stoic face of his.” She smiles. “So, when you were born, on time, healthy and loud, I named you after the old man, who never wavered in his convictions. And your father allowed it. He even offered I should name Regulus, when he came, but I thought it fair to let him at least name his second son.”

(-)

Sirius asks Harry to never speak to snakes in public.

“Why? Is it a bad thing?”

“No. But people are stupid; they would think it’s a bad thing. We must keep it a secret.”

Dumbledore would immediately know what Harry is, if rumours reach him he's a Parselmouth.

"I can't even tell Draco? He's my best friend, he wouldn't tell anyone!"

"Not even Draco. Promise me, Harry."

Harry promises.

Sirius' relationship with Astrid is perfect. With time, she lowers her barriers again, assures him he didn't hurt her, when he asks what happened at the Manor. "You were just very- unlike yourself. You looked haunted. Distant."

"I started taking those potions again," Sirius lies, when she asks what was wrong with him. "It got out of control."

Neither were ready for three boys, all in such a short time, but they work well together. They adapt.

They don't have much in common, besides their sons, but Sirius is determined to find things to do with her.

There are the parties- she loves those, so he always accepts invitations to anything he believes she'd enjoy.

Eventually, he discovers she enjoys traveling, so Sirius takes her wherever she wants.

She likes Sicily so much, Sirius buys a house there for her, even if they both know they won't be visiting it too often.

But he doesn't care. Whatever makes her smile, he's going to give it to her.

She's still…cold. Or perhaps reserved is a better word. But he doesn't care. She's a good mother, she's a good wife, so he is going to do his best to make her happy, or at least content.

He knows he can't love her. He can't love anyone, ever again. But she doesn't love him, either. Not really.

They have fun together, they get along well, they have sex pretty regularly, but it's no great love. They're…not friends, no, that's not right either.

They're partners. They have a common goal, an important one, *family*, but there's no passion.

His father was right. It's for the best. No passion means no fighting, no heated arguments, no lost tempers.

He does miss it, eventually. That fiery desire, that spark of adrenaline, something to remind him he's alive and young, as opposed to just Head of House Black, father to his sons, rising terror in the Wizengamot.

When he does cheat, after five years of marriage, Sirius does it on a work trip, far away from home, with a muggle.

And once he starts, he keeps doing it, whenever he's alone abroad, tending to family business, or Ministry business.

No one ever finds out. He doesn't think Astrid would care much, anyway, but he remembers how awful he felt that everyone knew his father was cheating on his mother, so he at least makes sure his affairs are very private, away from Britain. And *short*. He never fucks the same woman twice.

Bella knows, but that's because Sirius tells her everything.

She's living with Evy and the twins. As soon as she realised, when she came out of her stupor, that Rabastan has children, Bella quickly became attached to them. Eventually, she moved in with them, to Lucius' relief, and to Evy's delight.

Andromeda is delighted, too, because it was hard seeing Bella when she lived in Malfoy Manor. Andromeda's relationship with Narcissa is still incredibly strained. Cissa even rejects Dora, who is otherwise loved by the entire family. When she left for Hogwarts, Sirius' mum *cried*. Cygnus was depressed for a week.

The relationship between Andromeda and Ted is strained, as well, worse every year, especially since Dora went to school.

Many times, Andromeda came to spend a few nights in Grimmauld. But since Bella moved in with Evy, now Andromeda goes there.

Bella has a much easier time controlling the twins, and Evy stops looking as if she's about to collapse at any second.

Slowly, everything falls into place.

Sirius does heal…somewhat.

One day, he realises he can talk about his father, or James, with no pain in his heart.

He walks by his father's portrait every morning, and eventually it's just part of the decor. He sees James' picture, in Harry's room, every day, and that, too, becomes part of the decor.

Those wounds close. They scar, but they close.

Voldemort-

It doesn't heal. But Sirius refuses to think of it, and he's successful most of the times. When he can't stop it, he goes to Bella. She listens, they drink together, and he listens about Rodolphus. They cry, they break, and they put each other back together by sunrise.

He doesn't use astral magic. He gave up on it.

He tried, a few times, just to practice, to understand it better, but if Sirius can lock up his feelings pretty well, hide them, ignore them-

The magic *knows* what he wants, what he most craves. So whenever he tries to use it, the stars show him that forest again. Sirius thinks it's somewhere in Eastern Europe.

So he stops using it all together. It's for the best, anyway. Even without Voldemort-

It's too powerful. Old Sirius was mad, everyone agrees, he spent his last decades more between the stars than between people. He lost his marbles eventually.

His father was right about that, too. Some forms of magic are better left alone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you're still after the wait, I would love to hear your thoughts! ❤️

(Also, I published a short Walburga POV in this Universe, if you are curious. Oh, yes! Walburga canonically dies in 1985, but I can't bare letting her go- Sirius would completely shatter. So I change her fate by virtue of her sons being there to help her when she has a problem.)

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

> I am two days late, because this chapter originally had 20k words, but once I started editing...we're now at 35k words. I'm sorry!
>
> I spent so much time with this chapter, editing, cutting, putting scenes back together, rearranging them- I truly hope it's good, but I cannot edit it again, as I do with all my chapters before posting. I am simply too tired. So there might be more mistakes than usual- I will come back and re-edit in a couple of days, but I thought you'd prefer to have the chapter sooner rather than wait until I'm capable of another edit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Often, Sirius almost falls in love with Astrid.

It never quite happens, and he's not sure if she's the one that won't allow more between them, that imposed a distance, perhaps because of the way he acted in the first two years of their marriage, or if he's the one that always spooks and backs off.

He does love her- it's incontestable. She's the mother of his children, she's his staunch partner, always on his side, and she is a Black. To love her is his duty, but he could love her without liking her, as it's the case for some of his family members. Yet he likes her.

And there are moments when they grow so close, weeks together that go wonderfully, usually when they're on holiday, away from Grimmauld, and it's just them and the kids during the day, balls at night, or a private dinner. They talk, they laugh, they fuck, they sleep together in the same bed, holding each other.

But it always fizzles out, and in no time they're just partners, parents, and sometimes days pass without a single talk in private. It's never a tense silence, things are never bad with Astrid, no hostility, no fights, ever, at most some passive aggressive comments she lets out, but he can easily ignore.

"Who was she?" Astrid asks, some years into their marriage, in their room in Norway, when they're visiting her parents.

She's brushing her hair, seated before her vanity mirror, beauty and grace and coldness clinging to her every gesture.

"Who?" He's lounging on the bed, exhausted after having to play nice with his in-laws.

"The woman you love. The woman you mourn, still."

Her voice is neutral, there's no reproach in it, at best some slight curiosity.

"Doesn't matter. It's done," he says, after some seconds, the wound inside his chest flaring with pain, never healing, never getting better, always there, hidden, but festering.

She nods, meeting his eyes briefly through the mirror, and resumes brushing her hair.

She never asks again.

(-)

He doesn't fear Azkaban any longer.

He remembers he had, before, that he dreaded being caged, having to relieve his worst memories.

But Sirius has been hurt far worse outside this prison than inside it. And his worst memories visit him often, in his sleep, no Dementor beside him.

He's caged, already. He learned to accept it, he stepped up to the role, embraced it, but he trapped himself the moment he put his father's ring back on his finger.

No, he doesn't fear Azkaban.

It is still a horrible place, torturous and miserable, but he walks with his back straight, paying no mind to the Dementors.

Fudge gave him special permission; he gives Sirius and Lucius most everything they want. The man is the picture of incompetence; if he truly had to make any decision, the country would fall to ashes in a week. As it is, the Wizengamot rules, the constant old struggle between the elected and inherited seats, and for the more inconsequential matters, Fudge sends letters weekly to Dumbledore, asking for help, and he attends biweekly dinners with Sirius and Lucius, asking for gold.

The guard opens the cell, and then she disappears, locking Sirius inside, telling him to summon her when he's done.

Seeing Rabastan is far more terrible than being back in Azkaban.

He didn't know what to expect, what condition he'd find his friend in.

He's thin, awfully so, his hair grew long, his beard as well, and he blinks at Sirius for long moments once they are alone, but he recognises him, clearly. Attention sparks in his previously clouded eyes, and Sirius receives a sneer.

"What sort of lunatic returns here willingly?" Rabastan croaks, voice like gravel.

“I was never the sanest man,” Sirius answers, and Rabastan scoffs.

He doesn’t ask how Rabastan is doing; that would be a stupid question.

Instead, Sirius pulls out the photograph from his pocket, approaches carefully, and holds it out.

Rabastan takes it. He stares at it, with a frown, confused, moments on end.

When the confusion clears, he stands, hastily, takes a few steps until he’s under the small, barred window, stands under the little sunlight the cell gets, lifting the picture, to better look at it.

“Two?” he asks. “There’s two of them? Or am I seeing double?”

His hand shakes. It could be from starvation, atrophy, but Sirius doesn’t think it is.

“Boy and girl.”

Rabastan’s face twist, so many emotions, even if so little of his face is visible, what with the beard.

“Poor Evy,” he says. “Two. Fuck.”

“Regis and Regina.”

At this, Rabastan turns his back to Sirius. His shoulders shake now, too, and Sirius lets him have his moment.

He tries not to focus on the small cell, the even smaller coot. On the cold, and the draft, and that sea salt scent, so overpowering.

“What’s his name- that husband of hers- is he good to the children?”

Sirius swallows. “Paul. He’s dead. You killed him.”

Rabastan flinches. “Oh,” he whispers. “Oh.” And then, he starts laughing, a broken, harsh sound. “Yeah, that’s right. I killed him.” He turns, facing Sirius again. “Does she- did she-” He shakes his head, trying to focus. “She didn’t have gold, right? What happened to the Lestrange vault? Who has access to it-”

“She has everything she needs. She inherited after Paul, his family believes the twins are his, and I’m helping her, anyway. Lucius, too. We’re there for her and the kids.”

Rabastan frowns deepens. He looks at the picture again. “Someone thinks these are not my children?” He laughs louder. “Are they blind?”

“They’re Australian,” Sirius says, after a second.

That makes Rabastan laugh so hard his eyes tear up. He sits on his coot, slaps his knee. “Right, right. I forgot. With that horrid accent.” He keeps laughing. “I remember it now. Fucking idiot. He cried before I killed him. Gods, I wish I could kill him again.”

Sirius lives his life in a respectable way, now. Everyone does. In the war, killing and violence were normal, everyday occurrences, all sorts of atrocities surrounding them. Talking about it, witnessing it, hearing of it- it became normal.

But now- now Sirius realises how utterly vile they’ve all been. They *still* are. Only, out there in the world, they don’t talk about it anymore. Rabastan is a harsh reminder of what kind of people they are, deep down, when the manors and riches and fine robes and parties go away.

Not that Sirius is too estranged from violence; during the past years, he had six of the Hit Wizards that arrested him killed. But it wasn’t by his hand, and he supposes that removed him from the act. It’s different, giving an order, handing over some gold, and then getting out of his office and playing with his kids. Sirius doesn’t speak about it, not even with Lucius.

And Lucius says nothing to Sirius about two of the people that went missing, both of whom had proclaimed loudly Lucius had been a Death Eater out of his own free will.

Hearing Rabastan speak though, *laugh* about it-

It’s hard to hide from it. From all the shit they’re guilty of, from the horrible people they are.

‘Cold-blooded murderers, the lot of you,’ one of the men that went missing snarled at Lucius, in the Ministry atrium. It was the last time anyone saw him.

“I’ve had my jurist review your trial,” Sirius says. “We looked over all the transcripts, all the proof.”

Rabastan ignores him, looking at the picture.

“Your wand, when they examined it, the last spells weren’t so awful. You didn’t participate in the torture.”

Bella’s wand, Rodolphus’, and Barty’s all spat out the Cruciatus, when examined. But not Rabastan’s.

“We can work with that; we can ask for a new trial, on the basis the first one wasn’t fair. You should have had one individually, not grouped together. You didn’t torture them, but since they built their case on the Longbottoms, they didn’t bother investigating to find any other proof against you. Just that you were caught with the other three. You did fight the Aurors, when they descended on you, but you served five years already. We can say you were Imperiused, too. We can say Rodolphus made you. It’s not going to be perfect, it’s not guaranteed, but we can try. Lucius and I didn’t sit idly. Especially Grandfather and Arcturus. We’re back into a good standing with the Ministry, the Minister is practically in our pocket. We have a chance.”

Rabastan doesn’t look up. He runs his fingers over Evy’s face, in the picture.

“No,” he says, after some seconds.

“No? You have a chance to get out, see your children grow up-”

“You know what your problem is, Black? You’re the elder brother, not the younger one.”

“*What?*”

Granted, Sirius didn’t expect to find Rabastan reasonable, after five years, but a straight refusal- it catches him off guard.

“I don’t remember my father; perhaps I used to remember him, before this shithole, but I doubt it. I know he died when I was very young.”

He looks up, eyes more alert than they’ve been minutes before.

“Rodolphus is my brother *and* my father. And while you’re the older brother, you did have a father, didn’t you? Tell me, if you were here, where I sit, and your father would be across the hall, would you take the chance to abandon him? Would you throw the blame on him, beg prettily in front of those worms in the Ministry, dream of freedom, live your life, while knowing you left your father behind?”

“I’d know my father would want me to,” Sirius says, avoiding answering directly. “I know he’d want me to live.”

Rabastan snorts. He tilts his head.

“Look at you,” he hisses. “Serious Sirius. Head of House Black.” His eyes go over Sirius’ face, his hair, still short, and then to his hand, to where the Black rings shines, before returning to meet Sirius’ gaze. “You look like Orion.”

“Thank you,” Sirius barks.

“‘Twas not a compliment.” Rabastan sneers. “He was a great man, but you aren’t supposed to be him. You were supposed to be great on your own merit. Different. Now, you’re just a copy.” He scoffs. “You’re no freer than I am, Black.”

“Fuck you, Lestrange. Stubborn prick. What, you’d rather leave your kids fatherless -”

“I’d rather kiss a Dementor, suck its prick if it has one than bend my neck in front of the Wizengamot, beg for forgiveness. Fuck that! I don’t know what you had to do to get free, I don’t care, but I won’t bow before those cunts. I won’t explain myself to them. I won’t, *ever,* betray my brother.”

“You bowed to Voldemort.”

Rabastan stands. “He was nothing like the worms in the Ministry. Besides, I followed my brother, my father, my Head of House. The dark lord was incidental. Even so, serving a man like him did not bring me shame. I won’t cower for others.”

He turns his back to Sirius, once more. “Thank you for the picture. And for looking after Evy and the children,” he says, with finality.

(-)

Rodolphus sets him on edge. Sirius didn’t want, nor plan, to see him. But he wants to try, for Rabastan.

When he enters that cell, he finds Rodolphus lying with his face towards the floor, pushing with his arms against it, lifting his body, over and over.

The guards told him that Rodolphus eats his meals, always drinks his water; unlike all other prisoners.

The guards told him the Dementors are wary of Rodolphus, stay away from his cell.

Sirius knows they aren’t wary- they are just grateful for how well Rodolphus used to feed them.

He still lost weight, his hair and beard are long, but Rodolphus is himself, when he glances in Sirius’ direction, his face twisting with disgust, before returning his focus to his exercise.

Sirius tells him about Evy and the children; he tells him he and Lucius are willing to try to get Rabastan out. But that Rabastan refuses.

“Talk to him. You can’t want him here. You’re his older brother. You have a duty to protect him.”

Rodolphus does his exercise throughout Sirius’ speech.

“Where is Bellatrix?” he asks, still at it, never having looked at Sirius, outside that first moment when the cell opened to let him in.

“She’s fine.”

“She’s not. If she were fine, she’d have brought back our lord. Where is she?”

Sirius is not about to explain to Rodolphus that he has sons, sons that Bella loves, and promised to keep them safe from conflict.

He’s not about to explain what he did to himself, with the Horcrux, how suicidal he was, how Bella saw all that, understood truly how much Voldemort hurt him.

“She’s raising your niece and nephew,” Sirius says.

Rodolphus finally stands; he did lose weight, but he doesn't look as frail as Rabastan; as frail as Sirius was when he was released.

Five years. What a resilient bastard Rodolphus is.

"He'll come back," Rodolphus says. "The dark lord is immortal."

The Horcrux in Gringotts must surely be in Rodolphus' vault. There's nowhere else it can be, inside that bank.

Voldemort said he 'told' Bella about his Horcrux, but clearly, he did more that tell her. He gave her one.

And if she put it in her vault, then Rodolphus knows it; nothing goes inside his vault without his knowledge.

"Despite yours, Lucius', all the others- despite your treachery and cowardice, he will come back. Sooner or later. He will always find a way."

Rodolphus' eyes still burn bright with devotion.

"I *am* protecting my brother. Because when the dark lord returns and he finds you all living your best lives, oh, there will be hell to pay. He will unleash terror upon those who abandoned him. But he will know my brother did no such thing."

"Rodolphus-"

"He will know my faith in him never wavered. I rather my corpse rots here, Rabastan's as well, before denouncing the dark lord. It means nothing to you, because you are, always have been, a *traitor*; but I gave him my word, and I stand by it."

Sirius nods. He expected nothing else, but he had to try. He turns-

"Who has access to my vault?"

Rodolphus knows; he *knows* Bella never renounced Voldemort, that she'd never scheme for her freedom. He understands, somehow, that Sirius got her out by other means.

"Cygnus has the key," Sirius says. "As Bellatrix' legal guardian. I got her out by claiming she's insane."

"Of course he does," Rodolphus spits. He walks closer, and he's still fast and agile.

For a moment, Sirius thinks Rodolphus will attack him. He stands his ground, but Rodolphus simply takes out his family ring, shoves it into Sirius' hand.

"Contact my jurist; tell him to recognise those children as Lestranges, to change my will. I want half of my wealth to go to Bellatrix, and the other half to the children. I know Bella will raise them to be proper Lestranges. I hope she has enough influence over them to teach them how to be proud wizards and witches, unbent, and not whatever you and Malfoy became.

Give the jurist my ring, to seal the will. And then give it to Bella, to keep safe for when the boy is old enough to wear it."

"Funny," Sirius says, taking the ring. "Not long ago, you swore to kill those children."

Rodolphus turns around, returns to his exercises. "They might be the only future for my house, now."

(-)

"Absolutely not!" Evy screams. "My children won't bear that name! They'll lose the inheritance-"

"You don't need Paul's inheritance, you'll have half of the Lestrange vault-"

"And I won't have them carry the name of torturers and murderers!" Evy cuts over Sirius.

Silence falls.

After some seconds, Evy looks to Bella. "No offence," she says.

But Bella isn't paying attention, anyway, holding Rodolphus' ring, curled on the couch.

"That name has ancient history," Sirius tries. "They'll be far more respected with it, than without-"

Evy sneers. "Respected here, maybe. In our houses, in our circles. But out there? Out there, it's a curse! How do you expect them to go to Hogwarts with it? To stand in class with children that lost parents, uncles, aunts to Rodolphus and-" She eyes Bella again.

"You should have thought of that before you slept with Rabastan, if it bothers you so much," Sirius snaps at her. "The twins will be fine at school. Like my children, like Draco-"

"Your children and Draco have fathers and grandparents to defend them. You, Lucius, Yaxley, Parkinson- you were all *acquitted*! If I give my kids the Lestrange name, what will they have to shield them?"

"Me," Sirius says.

"No."

"You can't stop it, Evy. Rodolphus demanded they be recognised, he claimed them. You can't just decide to ignore it."

"I'll say they're not Rabastan's, like I've been saying-"

“The jurist will ask for their blood, to establish paternity, now that Rodolphus made a claim. Not like we need that, we have eyes, but he’ll legally make you do it. And that’s that. You know very well how things work-“

“The jurist won’t be doing any of that, if you don’t tell him to do it!” She comes closer, taking his hand. “Sirius, please! Don’t tell anyone.”

“I’m sorry.” Sirius steps back. “It’s the right thing to do. They are Lestranges, and they have every right to the name, the Manor, and the gold. They’re Rabastan’s sons.”

“They’re mine, too!”

“Yet they’re not carrying your name, but some strangers!”

“Sirius-”

“Quiet,” Bella demands. She unfurls from the couch, slipping Rodolphus’ ring in her robe pocket. “Calm yourself, Evelyn. Sirius won’t tell the jurist anything.”

“Rodolphus asked it of me,” Sirius says, staring at her. “It’s his wish.”

Bella raises her head, shoulders tall with pride. “Then you should have done as he said and went to the jurist first. But you didn’t. You came here, you asked us, because you understand that Evy, their fucking mother, has a say in this, too. And you gave me the ring already. You’re not getting it back. I might not have any legal rights, because Father stole that from me-”

“Are you fucking serious? *Stole*? We got you out, you’re free, and that was the only price you had to pay. Stole?! What the fuck is wrong with you? You can say what you want about Cygnus, but this isn’t his fault! He didn’t ask for it!”

“Regardless,” she spits. “I may not have any legal rights, but I am a Lestrange. And in Rodolphus’ absence, *I* will decide for this family. You won’t be speaking to the jurist.”

Evy sighs in relief. She collapses on a nearby armchair. “Thank the gods,” she mutters.

“So you’ll just ignore his last wish-”

“Last wish?” Bella’s eyebrow lifts. “He’s not *dead*.”

“I’ve been sneered at, called all sorts of traitor all day! The man asked for *one* thing and-”

“Well, you are a traitor,” Bella spits. “Many things were asked of you and you ignored them! What’s one more?”

Evy quietly stands, and leaves the room, closing the door behind her, knowing how explosive fights between Bella and Sirius can get.

“You teach your sons about the stars, you look at them every night, but you can’t *see*!” Bella snaps. “Mars is on the move! Look how bright it’s getting! War is close, the peace is coming

to an end. My lord will come back! I know why you won't help him, I haven't asked you to, and I chose to stand by you. But he is coming, Sirius, and when he's here, he'll save Rodolphus." She takes out the ring again, looks at it lovingly, and then squeezes her fingers around it. "And when he's with me again, then I shall bear his heir, not Evy," she declares.

"Oh, lovely! Now you're making prophecies!" Sirius barks at her.

"It's not a prophecy, you fucking moron! It's a fact!"

Later that night, as Sirius spends hours on the roof, he doesn't see anything wrong with Mars. It's where it should be, on its usual rotation.

Even during the war, even before it, Mars completed its rotations, undisturbed. It doesn't mean anything. If the future is written in the sky, as centaurs claims, as Bella seems to believe, Sirius can't see it, and if someone should see it, it's him.

Centaurs and Bella can't truly understand how *insignificant* people are; how vast and unconcerned the rest of the universe is with their planet.

Yes, some can Divine the future, catch glimpses of it, though that is a different type of magic, a different gift that has nothing to do with the stars. And so often, whatever is Divined is misinterpreted. That, or people fulfil prophecies only because they were trying so hard to avoid them.

Like Voldemort. If Voldemort never attacked Harry, Harry would have never brought his downfall.

He's a normal child, in every regard. He's smart, but he's no genius. His magic has potential, but it's nothing out of the ordinary. Harry isn't even inclined to knowledge, his tutors and Sirius need to nudge him to do his homework, when Harry otherwise prefers play.

And when Harry picks up a book, it's to read about mythological heroes, legends filled with glory, like all other boys. He was never one to want to learn theories, to get interested in potions. Truly, a child like any other children. The only thing that's spectacular about him is the Horcrux in his head, but he wouldn't have had that if Voldemort hadn't attacked him.

Completely self-fulfilled.

So many prophecies are like that.

You know he will return, a part of Sirius that he silences daily whispers. *It doesn't have to be written in the stars, or any such nonsense. He will return, because he's alive, and he never gives up.*

It makes Sirius dizzy, whenever he thinks of it. His chest constricts, he goes from cold to hot and back to cold, and he feels he can't breathe. It happens every single time he thinks of Voldemort's return.

(-)

When Mrs Pettigrew dies, Sirius looks for Peter.

Finding him isn't an issue. He finds Peter immediately, once Sirius makes himself use astral magic, and forces it to bypass Voldemort, what he most wants to find, and focus on Peter.

The issue is what to do with him.

Kill him, all his ancestor demand.

James wouldn't want it, but this isn't just about James. Peter betrayed not only James; he betrayed Sirius, too.

Arcturus reminds him, from time to time, what fate should await those that cross the Black family.

And the Head of House Black wants Peter dead.

Even the friend inside him wants Peter dead; James' friends wants Peter to die.

But Padfoot…

He knows he'll hesitate. If Peter is before him, he'll hesitate. He thinks he would have hesitated even that night, when the rage and pain were so fresh, when all he wanted was Peter's blood.

It's been years; his rage lessened.

He tells Harry and his sons stories about his Hogwarts days, about James, and Remus, and Peter. He remembers that boy, who always packed extra food for James and Sirius, who always stood by Sirius, who told him *'I wouldn't want to get you killed'* when he thought Sirius might ask him to perform the Fidelius for him.

"You think too little of yourself."

"It's just a fact," Peter said.

I won't be able to do it, not fast, Sirius knows. He will hesitate, and Peter is not a good fighter, but he's fast, has keen survivor instincts. He'll flee, and Sirius will only feel more defeated.

The only thing worse than killing a friend, is attempting to kill one and failing.

Let him be, a part of Sirius begs. He lost his mother, he hadn't seen her when she most needed him, he hides as a rat- surely, that is punishment enough.

But everyone knows Peter betrayed him; and with every day Peter still lives, Sirius looks weak. He looks like an idiot that trusted a man, took him under his wing, and got stabbed in the back.

And if someone like Peter can do that to Sirius…who else might feel emboldened to betray him?

(-)

"You owe me a life," Sirius says, walking towards Bella.

She's brewing a potion in Evy's garden, the twins playing further away, chasing each other through a small hedge maze.

Bella doesn't look up, stirring away, sniffing the fumes. "I owe you nothing, but I will help you. What do you need?"

"Peter."

She looks up, then.

"You condemned him to death when you approached him; it's time you finish what you started."

Bella tilts her head to the side. She considers Sirius for a handful of seconds. "Where is he?"

Sirius gives her the location. "I think he lives with Weasleys?" At least he saw a bunch of red-headed children playing around when Sirius looked for Peter. "You won't touch them. Peter will be in rat form. You should-"

She sneers at him. "You think I can't catch an Animagus?"

"He's fast, Bella. He's fast as a man, and he's faster as a rat-"

"Snakes are faster, still," she says. "No one escapes me. You forget who you are speaking to."

No. Sirius doesn't forget. Others might, many allowed themselves to look at Bella as an eccentric Aunt, childish and weird, because she rather spend her time with children than adults.

But he never forgets Bella's prowess, her extraordinary magic.

"My best student," Voldemort called her. "*She almost disarmed me, once, when I hadn't yet learned the extent of her powers. I never underestimated her again."*

"Don't hurt him," Sirius asks, in a whisper. "If it's possible, kill him before he realises it."

She frowns. “You’re still too *soft*, Sirius.” She abandons her potion, walks to him, cups his face. “Still too soft,” she repeats. She sighs, smiles, sadly, fondly. “But that’s fine. I can be your strength.”

She’s named after a warrior star. *“She holds the shield, see?”* his father would point out, as he showed him the stars.

(-)

Days later, Arthur Weasley calls the Aurors in a frenzy, saying he found Peter Pettigrew dead in his shed.

It’s easily determined he was felled by a Killing Curse. The adult Weasleys’ wands are verified, even if no one suspects them of it.

After that, the trail goes cold.

Peter’s aunt, the only surviving member of her family, buries Peter next to where Sirius buried his mother.

“Good,” his grandfather says, when he reads the paper.

What would Remus think? Sirius wonders.

(-)

He returns to Voldemort’s home, some four years after the ring debacle.

It’s exactly as painful as it was last time he did it, but now he can deal with it better.

The house is a mess- Sirius should have at least closed the windows last he was here.

He takes a few moments to steel himself, and then he goes searching through Voldemort’s books.

It’s easy, because Sirius long figured out that while there’s too many of them, overflowing on enlarged shelves, stacked against walls, there is order to it.

They are organised by purpose, and then alphabetically. So, in no time, Sirius finds the household charms books.

Sirius finally learns the spells for cleaning.

He absolutely hates it. But he does it, room by room. Removes all the dust that settled in, all the dirt and leaves that came through the windows.

The spell for washing floors turns them slippery and soapy, as he sits on the couch, and directs the process.

After that's done, he finds out how to fix the floors in the places the wood expanded from rainwater.

The walls almost do him in, where water left dark trails on what used to be perfect white. Oh, the stains themselves are easy to remove, but the mould that settled in is not so easy.

But it's good. Work is good- he might hate it, but the frustration keeps him from thinking too much.

It takes hours.

He finds the parchment with his songs under the couch, the wind probably blew it away at some point.

There's only one drawer that opens at Voldemort's desk- the others remain firmly locked, and the man is mostly dead, he's a fucking ghost, somewhere far away, yet Sirius still can't bypass the strength of the locking spells.

By the shed, his bike remains in pristine condition.

The shed remains fully locked, too.

What a phenomenal fucking wizard.

The garden is wild, overgrown. Not that it was a true garden, Voldemort had no flowers, just neatly cut grass and trees.

Now the grass is overgrown, weeds everywhere.

As Sirius hurries back inside the house to find a book on gardening, the spells necessary for it, it occurs to him he saw no snakes.

Before, when *he* was still here, there were snakes everywhere, even if he never caught Voldemort talking to them, outside the few moments he hissed a short warning for them to piss off, when they would apparently get too close to Sirius, who was unaware, focused on astral magic or tinkering with his bike.

It wasn't like Voldemort wanted the snakes or paid any attention to them, but they still came, and came in large numbers.

Now, nothing. As Sirius badly trims up the garden, he doesn't see a single one.

He feels better when the place is presentable again. It still looks wrong, and cold, and abandoned, but that is just because the man who made it alive isn't there.

When he returns to Grimmauld, he pats Kreacher on the back. He's grown a sudden appreciation for all this cleaning shit- it's fucking awful and exhausting.

Sirius doesn't understand how muggles do it, with no magic. What, do they truly actually sweep dust with a broom? Lily said so, but surely, that can't be?

(-)

He takes Harry to James' grave every month, for a while, until he realises Harry doesn't really like it. No matter how hard Sirius tries to keep James alive, to create a bond between him and Harry, he understands it's useless.

Harry will never miss a man he didn't know; he's rarely curious about his biological parents, because he sees Sirius and Astrid as parents.

There's no point to force it. He still speaks of James to Harry, as often as he remembers, and Harry likes hearing it, especially funny stories, but he eventually comes to terms with the fact Harry will never love James as Sirius loved him.

He takes Orion and Marvolo to his father's grave every two weeks.

His father's portrait dominates the living room, Arcturus speaks often about him, and so does Sirius. It is a constant presence in his sons' conciseness, and Orion is especially interested because he's his namesake.

Sirius tells them about old Sirius, too, he teaches them about Phineas Nigellus, and Cetus, and Helix, and all the great men that came before them.

He teaches them constellations, stays up with them on the roof at night, patiently pointing out stars, over and over again.

Harry is a part of these lessons, and he enjoys them, mostly because he likes spending time with what he perceives as siblings, and with Sirius, whom is the only father Harry will ever know.

But it's clear Harry has no bond with the stars.

His sons feel it. They might not have astral magic, but all Blacks have an affinity for stars, enjoy being under open night skies.

Of course, Bella teaches them, too. Bella teaches them many things Sirius wouldn't, speaks of things he wouldn't have, but he doesn't stop her.

She's…well, she's Bella.

Harry is not part of those conversations.

But while Sirius doesn't expose Harry to Bella's brand of venom, it's impossible to shield him completely.

Sirius has never said, and never will say the word ‘mudblood’ again. Not after it was the last word he spoke to Lily.

But his mother says it; Narcissa, Lucius, Draco, Regulus, Parkinson’s girl, Crabbe’s and Goyle’s offsprings- *everyone* says it.

It truly is impossible to keep Harry away from such discourse.

He does make sure to reiterate to him, and to Orion and Marvolo, that muggleborns are not filthy, that Sirius doesn’t think them less magical.

But he fears just his voice won’t ever be enough to silence the other opinions the boys are getting.

It doesn’t help Astrid is the worst of the bunch. In fact, she might be the biggest reasons his boys are becoming little blood purists, because they adore their mother, Harry included.

She can do no wrong in their eyes.

Astrid never raises her voice, Astrid never enforces any punishments, Astrid covers for them when they misbehave. She’s calm, and steady, and always has kinds words of comfort, praise and love for the three kids.

She has a lot of contempt, derision, hate for *anyone* else outside family.

“Meant to be,” Narcissa likes to say. “She was meant to be one of us. What a perfect wife for a Black man!”

“You did choose her,” Sirius reminds her, amused.

Lucius takes the credit, and he was a part of it, but Sirius has known for a while, deep inside his soul, that it was Narcissa who picked Astrid.

Not to be defeated so easily, Sirius gets in contact with Mary. She married, has children of her own, with a muggle. But both her daughters are magical, and she sometimes brings them to wizarding places, so they won’t be the perfect strangers she was when she received her letter.

“Mary is a dear friend of mine,” Sirius tells the boys. She’s not really a friend, but she is dear to Sirius, after her small, but unwavering support through the worst times of his life. “You will treat her daughters with respect and consideration, or you’ll face my wrath.”

“What’s wrath?” Marvolo asks.

“It’s *bad*,” Orion whispers to him. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Harry seems amused. He never faced Sirius or Arcturus’ wrath. Not even Walburga’s Black infamous temper.

Sirius was *very* clear that if anyone touches Harry, they will be disowned immediately.

Luckily, Harry is a well behaved child, generally, and when he gets in trouble, it's usually with Draco, at Malfoy Manor, where Narcissa hands out gentle punishments.

When it's something a bit more troublesome, Sirius does some half-arsed disciplining of his own, taking Harry's toys away or not allowing him to see Draco for a week or two.

Marvolo is strangely well behaved, too much for a Black, really, he takes after his calm mother; and when he does misbehave, he's usually just copying Orion.

Orion is a demon. Sirius loves the boy, *fiercely*, but Orion sometimes drives him insane.

He did settle down a bit, after Sirius realised he will never be the saint his own father was.

He had aimed to emulate his father; well, he aspired to be more affectionate than his father had been, but generally he wanted to have the man's patience, the rules of never hitting his sons.

But Sirius is not his father. Granted, most disciplining is done by Arcturus, but Sirius' temper got the best of him on a handful of occasions, what with Orion testing it so often.

At least now Orion is slightly more manageable. He's still behaving his best around Arcturus; when the old man is around, Orion turns into the perfect miniature gentleman.

He knows Sirius will let him get away with a *lot* of things before he snaps, so sadly Orion isn't as civilised if Arcturus isn't there.

"He's a menace," Lucius says. "A proper menace."

"He's a darling," Narcissa huffs. "In any case, not even half as bad as Sirius was."

"That's true," Lucius admits. "You were worse," he glares at Sirius. "I wanted to strangle you every time you came over when you were Orion's age."

Sirius' father truly was a saint. He doesn't understand how his father abstained from hitting him.

The playdates with Mary go well. Harry, the oldest, is a little bored, but only until he discovers some of the muggle toys.

All the boys love the muggle toys.

Marry sits with Sirius on the bench, with her very modern short haircut, with her very muggle clothes, and chats about her husband, whom she met when she was on the run from the war, in Spain.

She even finds some pictures of Lily form their Hogwarts years, and she brings them to Harry for the second play-date.

She's still a wild one, at heart, even married and with children, and it makes Sirius smile, especially once he discovers she still goes to muggle rock concerts.

“There are so many new bands!” she insists, when Sirius confesses he hadn’t really kept up with muggle music. “My God, Sirius! You need to listen to Metallica!”

He remembers, as they talk, that he’d have dated her, back when they were young. That he *wanted* to date her, that he was half in love with her, but he knew nothing would come of it, because she was a muggleborn; he was terrified what his father would do if Sirius actually called her a girlfriend, instead of ‘someone I had fun with’.

It was for the best, Sirius reminds himself. Astrid truly is perfect for him; he cannot imagine being married with anyone else. Not even Bella.

In the end, his sons still think muggleborns are stupid animals.

“Except Viviene and Anne,” Orion adds. “They’re alright, I guess.”

Sirius counts it as progress. “You should only judge someone after you meet them,” he advises.

Orion quirks an eyebrow at him. “Did you meet the entire magical population of Norway, Father? Because you always say they’re all backwards idiots.”

The boy truly is a menace.

It was even worse when he was younger, and he’d answer in Norwegian, saying gods know what, whenever he wanted to escape a question or another.

But Sirius made sure to learn Norwegian, made Harry learn it, too, and now has to listen to the boys talking shit about everyone around them, since no one else understands them.

Of course, Sirius’ skill is nowhere near as good as his sons, because when alone with the children, Astrid only speaks to their sons in her mother’s tongue, so the boys are perfectly fluent, and Sirius struggles to keep up, especially when they go fast.

The worst parts of Sirius’ summers are the two weeks he has to spend in Norway.

Well, he doesn’t *have to*, but he figures it’s only polite to go with Astrid when she visits her parents.

She visits her family for a week in winter, too, but she doesn’t take the children with her then, so Sirius uses it as an excuse to stay home and look after them.

Never mind he’d *die* if he had to actually look after the boys alone for one week; it’s Kreacher and his mother that do all the hard work during that week.

His in-laws visit, too, another two weeks in spring, and even if Sirius offers them the Black Manor for their stay, he can’t completely avoid meetings between Astrid’s mother and his own, and those are always tense and headache inducing.

In Norway, Sirius is paraded around to various social functions, almost every singe night.

“Must I?” he asked, on their very first trip.

“Yes,” Astrid said. “I want to show you off. I have the handsomest and richest husband out of all my old friends. What’s the use of all that if I cannot brag about it?”

Astrid is snappier in Norway than she’s in England, Sirius discovered. More direct and honest.

However, as the boys grow, Sirius despises Norway less, only because Orion and Marvolo love it so much. They’re treated as little princes whenever they’re there, spoiled beyond belief, loved, and Sirius would never deny them love.

He leaves Harry in England, once it becomes clear Harry will be ignored there, set aside, and in an environment Sirius has no control over.

It’s no matter. Harry is excited to spend those two weeks with Draco, in whatever mansions Lucius has around Europe.

Though, always, after two weeks away from Sirius, Harry takes about two more to stop saying ‘mudblood’ or ‘filthy, stupid muggles’ or any number of things Sirius patiently corrects.

The worst visits are in Russia. Two of them, so far, and it was the closest Sirius got to personally murdering someone since the war.

He refused to bow to the Emperor, and immediately started off wrongly. There are actual princes there, and princesses, and Sirius is standoffish with most of them.

He only gets along with the Crown Prince, *somewhat*, and with the Emperor’s concubine, an enigmatic, beautiful woman whose age Sirius can’t guess.

That certainly doesn’t endear him to the Emperor, that Sirius flirts with his woman throughout dinner, and asks her to dance, after, but such is life.

Orion doesn’t like it in Russia, either, because suddenly he’s not the most important child, with the most important name. He can’t bully some of those kids easily, and it frustrates him, which only makes him act out more.

Though, apparently, the Emperor is amused when Orion smashes a plate over another’s kid head; he is not so amused when Sirius draws his wand at a duke who made a snide comment about ‘*that dark lord you had in England, that pretender with no name, what a sorry excuse of a wizard*’.

Sirius is lucky his wife is of royal blood, otherwise he would surely be locked up after what he did to that man.

“I’m sorry I was...” Sirius says to Astrid, when they return to England. “I know those people are your blood. I shouldn’t be so awful-“

“I like you awful,” she says, simply. “You have no idea how some of those idiots looked down on me and my sisters all our lives. It’s fun unleashing you on them.”

Truly, Astrid is the perfect wife for him.

“The point of you marrying Astrid was to get powerful foreign allies,” Lucius complains, when he hears of what transpired. Though he heard about it *before* Sirius even got back home. Gossip travels fast in their world. “Not to make enemies.”

Astrid waves it away. “My uncle, the Crown Prince, likes Sirius. What the others think is irrelevant.”

“One would say the Emperor’s opinion is the most-“

“He won’t live forever,” Astrid says. “He’s one hundred and ten years old; surely, he’ll…find eternal rest, sooner rather than later.”

Lucius sighs. “I did hear rumours the Emperor bends his ear to his concubine’s every whim these days.”

“And she likes me plenty,” Sirius boasts. “Don’t fret, Lucius.”

Sirius did make use of his connections, as Lucius calls them.

Years before, he found out Karkaroff was seeking refuge at his old school, and Durmstrang is impossible to even locate on a map.

Luckily, Sirius knew someone that had access to Durmstrang.

He only asked Thor to hand Karkaroff over.

“For what reason?”

“He betrayed me.” Not Sirius, directly, but he betrayed Bella. Any act against her, is an act against the Black family. *“He needs to answer for it.”*

Thor didn’t hand Karkaroff over.

Weeks later, his *body* was found, mangled and frozen, by muggle authorities.

Thor sent him the newspaper article.

“*You didn’t have to,”* Sirius said, next they saw each other. Sirius didn’t ask him to kill the man.

“We are family now. My daughter’s fate is forever tied with yours. I did have to. Your enemies are now her enemies, and thus, my own,” is all Thor said, talking softly, quietly, just the two of them, in a corner, while their family loudly enjoyed a Beltane celebration.

Neither mentioned it again.

Back in England, Sirius announced to the rest of the Death Eaters that he dealt with Karkaroff.

No one treats him like a rebellious child after that. Even Abraxas stops sneering at Sirius.

No one argued with him anymore when Sirius insisted they must keep Greyback close, that they should honour the promises Voldemort made to the pack, at least what parts of that promise they can honour.

They find the pack a large enough forest, owned in part by Sirius, in part by Lucius and Nott, and settle Greyback there.

Of course, it's only Sirius that goes to meet with Greyback, every now and then, to give him medicine the werewolf occasionally needs for the young.

When Wolfsbane is finally mass produced and approved, now that Voldemort isn't there to stop it, Dumbledore asks to see Sirius, for the first time since that day in the office, when he handed Sirius a Deathly Hallow.

"There are rumours you are giving shelter to Greyback's' pack."

He can't complain Dumbledore knows about it; not when Sirius *wants* the rumours to circulate. No proof, of course, but even the people that weren't wise enough to be wary of Sirius, now have extra incentive not to annoy him.

"Do take care the next full moon, Marfleet," Sirius once snarled, in a Ministry hallway, at a Hit Wizard, one that had been part of the team that arrested Sirius and his mother.

Marfleet disappeared after the next full moon.

"Slander," Sirius drawls. He made Dumbledore visit him in Black Manor, on his domain, on his terms.

Dumbledore gives him a *look.*

Long ago, Sirius would have withered underneath it. But no longer. He holds that all knowing gaze with no shame.

"Apparently, he listens to you. Convince him to send the magical children in his pack to Hogwarts. We can do it safely now. Perhaps even legally. Wolfsbane will help."

It's so hard to hate Dumbledore, when the man stands in front of Sirius, asking him to help children get a chance in life.

He could berate Sirius about his …choices, in the past few years, about Hit Wizards going missing, about Peter turning up dead, but apparently he's done berating Sirius.

He only wants to help those that can be helped.

Of course, Greyback won't hear of it.

“It would benefit the pack, if you had capable, learned wizards in it,” Sirius tries to reason with him.

“They will never drink that poison! And as if I don’t know- they’ll turn whatever cub I send against me, fill their heads with lies.”

Many meetings later with Dumbledore, even more with Greyback, Sirius manages a compromise.

Dumbledore will provide a small house, on the outskirts of a muggle neighbourhood. He will strong arm Remus into going there twice a week.

And Greyback will allow the young magical werewolves from the pack to go there and learn whatever they can, as long as Remus doesn’t make any attempt to speak badly of the pack.

Sirius has no idea how Dumbledore convinces Remus to do it- or, perhaps, Remus would be easily persuaded, trying to do some good in the world.

Not like he has any other job. “He can’t find employment, as you know,” Dumbledore says. “Even with the muggles- it’s getting increasingly difficult, these days, they require all sort of papers and qualifications to hire someone. Not to mention he needs free days on every full moon.”

Sirius pays his salary, a generous one, but makes Dumbledore swear Remus will never learn it’s from him.

The old man agrees, with a sad expression. “You always liked to flaunt your faults and hide the kindest parts of you.”

Sirius throws him out of the Manor, and they resume their previous arrangements of simply nodding at each other, silently, when they meet for a Wizengamot vote.

(-)

“What are you doing?” Lucius asks, dragging Draco after him by the hand.

Draco looks confused. “She fell, Father, so I helped her up. You said to help girls when they need it, that I am a gentleman-”

“*Our* girls. That’s a mudblood.”

Sirius rolls his eyes, where he’s sat on the bench. Lucius lets go of Draco, whose face is now wide with shock.

Harry trails behind them- he and Draco are inseparable- and stops in front of Sirius.

In the distance, Orion and Marvolo are terrorising a group of children.

“Oh!” Draco whispers. “Oh, NO!” He holds out his hand that he used to help Mary’s daughter up, and stares at it in abject *horror*. “Am I contaminated now? Do you have to cut it?”

Lucius snorts. “You’re fine. Just don’t- don’t play with her.”

“But what is she doing here if she’s a mudblood? Don’t they only find out about magic when they get their Hogwarts letter?”

“Her mother is a witch,” Sirius answers.

They don’t have many places where only magical children can play with each other, but at least there are *some*, scattered around England.

Small villages, *tiny*, but they are all hidden from muggles and boast of playgrounds where magical children can socialise with each other.

Draco frowns. “But if her mum’s a witch, then-”

“Her mother is a mudblood,” Lucius informs him. “Thus, the girl has no magical grandparents at all, regardless if her mother is a witch. You need at least a magical grandparent to be a half-blood.”

“Oh, right,” Draco and Harry say at once. No doubt things their tutors teach them. Or Arcturus, or Abraxas.

Really, there’s a great list of people that are probably responsible with indoctrination.

“I have two magical grandparents,” Harry says.

“Yes.” Lucius smiles at him. “Not just magical, but proper purebloods. The Potters are an old family.”

Harry smiles back. “Yes! I can trace my bloodline to the Middle Ages!”

For that information, Sirius is responsible. He always tries to teach Harry about the Potters.

“And,” Lucius goes on, “when you will marry a nice pureblood girl, your children will be purebloods.”

Sirius rolls his eyes again.

Orion is now playing with Mary’s daughter, Viviene, helping her up a moving small tower that keeps trying to shake her off.

Sirius smiles at Mary, across the park, and she waves at him.

“Lucius,” Harry asks. “What if someone has four magical grandparents, but the grandparents are all mudb-”

“Muggleborns,” Sirius reminds him.

“Muggleborns,” Harry corrects. “What does that make the child?”

“Pureblood,” Lucius answers. “First generation pureblood. His parents were magical, his grandparents were all magical, so we can accept that child into our world wholly, and assume he’s perfectly integrated, that he inherited what makes us magical from all sides of his family.”

“That’s complicated,” Harry sighs. “No wonder I never do well on the tests. I can’t remember all that!”

“You will, in time,” Lucius assures him.

“What if a squib marries a muggle, Father?” Draco pipes up. “What is that?”

“An abomination,” Lucius mutters, quietly, so only Sirius hears him. Then, louder, he says, “Guess.”

“Half-blood? Because there are magical grandparents on the squib’s side?”

“Exactly. And if a squib marries a pureblood?”

Draco bites his lip. “Then the child is a pureblood.”

Lucius winks at him. “See, not so hard to remember. Now, go, play. But stay away from the little mudblood. Oh, and that boy, in the blue -whatever they call those horrid trousers -”

“Jeans,” Harry and Sirius say, at once.

“That one is also a mudblood. So stay clear of him, too.”

“I should wash my hands first, though,” Draco says, extending his hands. “Since I touched the mudblood. Just to be safe.”

“You’re not contaminated just by touching one,” Lucius assures him. “Your mother exaggerates with these matters. Go, play.”

Draco still vigorously wipes his hand on his robe, before he and Harry head to the tiny Quidditch pitch, though really, it’s just mounting a broom that only moves a few inches to the left or right, and the only thing they can do is throw a Quaffle at each other.

“So, what ‘nice pureblood girl’ will Harry marry?” Sirius asks Lucius, once they are alone. “Do tell me. Since all the ‘nice, pureblood girls’ can’t mix with half-bloods?”

Lucius waves it away. “A minor family that wants to integrate themselves with you,” he answers. “Or, who knows, a girl from a blood-traitor family. We’ve got plenty of those.”

“You’re insane. My sons can marry whoever they want.”

Unlike poor Draco, that’s already promised to one of the Greengrass girls. They haven’t signed a contract yet, Lucius wants Draco to at least have the choice between Daphne or Astoria, but there is an informal promise between the families.

Lucius gives him a doubtful look. “So, if Orion comes home with a mudblood, you’ll let him marry her?”

Sirius doesn’t answer. Lucius laughs. “Yeah, thought not.”

“Harry can marry whoever he wants,” he rectifies.

“You’re treating them differently,” Lucius warns. “And it’s not good. Not for Harry, not for your sons, not for the relationship between them.”

Sirius does treat Harry differently. Because James and Lily would want him to grow up with certain values, would have wanted him to be treated a certain way.

“He’s a half-blood,” Sirius says. “His mother was a muggleborn. I won’t let him run around saying shit, or hating muggles.”

Lucius shakes his head. “Sirius…he’s surrounded by-”

“Yes. Especially because of that. At least he has me to correct it.”

Lucius sighs. “Whatever you say.”

It’s not like Sirius doesn’t correct his own sons. He takes all of them to muggle London, he tries to teach them not to hate muggleborns for no reason, but he knows it’s hopeless, especially with Orion, that is so close to both Arcturus, and Sirius’ mother.

At least everyone in his house knows to mind themselves when talking about half-bloods. Sirius is really strict about that.

And he was successful. Not only within his family, but almost all families in the Twenty-Eight that have access to Harry.

Sirius made it clear he will be most displeased if someone badmouths half-bloods around the kid, and it hadn’t happened so far.

Besides, there’s Cygnus, too. Who loves his half-blooded granddaughter more than he loved his daughters.

Everyone treats Nymphadora and Harry like purebloods, and the children around them are far more accepting of half-bloods because of it, as opposed to Sirius’ generation.

(-)

“Oh, no, no,” Sirius says, lounged in Astrid’s bed, watching her dress. “No need for black! Put on the one you got in Rome! With the split down the leg-”

“It’s a wake, Sirius,” Astrid says, eyebrow raised. “The poor man is dead.”

“It’s a party. It’s the seventh husband she buries. Trust me- it’s a party.”

“Does she really kill them?” Astrid asks, and after a moment of consideration puts aside the black dress, but picks another one, mostly black, but with a little bit of cleavage and with purple accents on the hem.

“Either that, or she’s the most unlucky woman in the world. Or, the luckiest, really, since they all leave her small fortunes. At least she gave this one a child.”

Sirius hears Bianca returned to England with Zabini’s corpse but with a child, too.

“Poor boy,” Astrid says. “Lost his father, and so young-”

Sirius waves it away. “He’ll get a new father before the year is over, just watch.”

They hold the wake at Malfoy Manor.

“So, you’re alright with a wife murdering a husband- or seven- but not one cheating on a husband?” Sirius asks, since Narcissa still isn’t speaking with Evy, but is on very good terms with Bianca. “Lucius, run, my friend.”

“I’m not worried,” Lucius smirks. “I’m worth more alive than dead.”

Narcissa rolls her eyes. “I won’t allow slander in my home,” she informs Sirius.

Bellatrix speaks with Bianca, further away, by the bar, making men drool in their direction.

Bianca is one of the few women able to stand next to Bellatrix and still look gorgeous. There’s a reason she keeps finding husbands, even if everyone knows they keep dying on her.

Sirius goes to offer his condolences; last he talked to her, he was fourteen, and she was between her second and third husband, having a grand ol’ time, sitting so close to Sirius’ father, whispering to each other, her fingers curled around his shoulder.

He holds no illusions about what his father and Bianca did when they disappeared together later that night, to the envy of all men around.

Her third husband, it was said, was a political rival of Sirius’ father. He introduced him to Bianca, and isn’t that an inventive way of getting rid of an enemy?

“Thank you, darling,” she says, kissing his cheek, though that’s not really proper. “My, my, how you’ve grown!”

She's been in Italy the past few years. Sirius supposes it's easier for her to kill her husbands in her own country, where she presumably has allies helping her hide the evidence. So she lures men back there, and then returns with a corpse.

"And yet you haven't aged a day," Sirius responds. Not that she's old. She's Bella's age, only a year or so older from what Sirius remembers.

"I don't know why she keeps marrying," Lucius says, after an hour, having talked to Bianca about some investments they manage together. "She's rich enough on her own right, now."

"Just habit, I suppose," Sirius answers, with a shrug.

She's so beautiful, so charismatic, even the strict old men don't judge her too much. They just keep in mind to never marry her, or allow their sons too close to her.

Whatever she is, she's apparently a good, devoted mother, Sirius finds out, when later that week she introduces Blaise to the boys.

Blaise, as beautiful as his mother, is such a nice boy, so well-mannered, Sirius takes a liking to him, and he's approved to be around Harry. Bianca is no Death Eater material, not one to care about Voldemort and the war- Bella claims she'd be powerful enough to have fought, but since Death Eater isn't a payed position and there was no gold for her in it, she never bothered with the war.

(-)

He didn't intentionally stay clear of men; he doesn't think so, at least, but he fucked only women, until he meets Felix, the German Head of Magical International Co-operation department, and also the head of an old German pureblood family, vaguely related to the Yaxleys.

A politician, through and through, a honey tongued liar, which Sirius usually despises, yet Felix mitigates it with harsh eyes, and a low, deep voice, cruel remarks, carefully hidden by compliments.

He's an awful man, tall and dark-haired, into his late forties, and he catches Sirius' interest mere minutes into their meeting.

Sirius clearly caught his interest, too, because that night, as he's staying at the Meyer residence, with some old family acquaintances in Berlin, he receives an invitation for dinner.

'A private dinner'.

It's the beginning of Sirius' longest affair- or better said, his only affair. The rest hardly count, random encounters that lasted no longer than a night or two.

But Felix… Sirius finds political excuses to go to Germany, growing flimsier with each visit, and Felix finds reasons to visit England in return.

To give them credit, they do manage to bring Germany-Britain relations to an all-time high, and finally heal the rift caused by Grindelwald in the forties and fifties, but that's only incidental to the affair.

Sirius falls a little in love with him, that same feeling of 'this could have worked before Voldemort, but it doesn't quite work now' he has with Astrid from time to time.

Yet he can't trust. He doesn't even trust Astrid enough to love her, even if she's his wife, even if he is damn sure she can't leave him, won't ever leave him; he definitely can't trust Felix with his heart, who is ruthless and generally terrible.

Of course, he isn't that way with Sirius.

Belatedly, Sirius wonders if he has a thing for arseholes that go out of their ways to be a nuisance to everyone around them, except Sirius.

Felix is one of the most hated wizards in Germany, and with good reason; Sirius had seen enough of how he acts within the German Ministry, and with the general magical population of Berlin, when they go out to restaurants there, to know the hate is warranted.

Felix, unlike the other people he slept with abroad, far away from home, some of them muggle, is the only one that knows what the faint scars on Sirius' left arm mean. As the Head of an old family that used to support Grindelwald, and as a politician, he recognises the traces left behind by the Dark Mark.

He asks about the war, eventually, but he desists fast enough, when Sirius gives him monosyllabic answers.

People do find out about them, eventually, or at least suspect.

Felix' wife knows her husband well, an arranged marriage, political and cold, far colder and strained than Sirius' marriage. When she first meets Sirius, at a political function in Vienna, she just rolls her eyes at her husband.

Plenty of ministry officials from both England and Germany speak of the 'strong friendship' between Felix and Sirius.

No one minds much- they wouldn't. Sirius and Felix are both married, both produced heirs, did their pureblood duty, so outside of a snide remark here and there, it doesn't pose a problem.

Sirius' mother knows as soon as she sees Felix, in one of those officials visits that call for balls and fanfare, since the German Minister comes along.

The function is held at Black Manor, and his mother takes one look at Felix, turns to Sirius with narrowed eyes, and she just sighs in disappointment, but mercifully keeps her mouth shut.

His grandfather is good at ignoring things that displease him.

Blessedly, Astrid has no clue. Sirius believes she must know, or at least heavily suspect, that he is sleeping around in some of his long foreign visits, but she would never assume it's with a man.

Some are aware in England about him and Voldemort, Death Eaters gossip like no one else, and Avery has the loudest mouth in the world, but apparently none of them told their wives, because that particular rumour never reached Astrid, though otherwise she learned of Marlene, of Rita, of Evy, and every other woman Sirius used to fuck back in the day.

Not even Narcissa knows about Voldemort, Sirius is pretty certain. Evy is equally clueless.

In fact, many people still believe Bellatrix was the one sleeping with Voldemort. Even outside their circles, since Bella was arrested and then pardoned, people like to make up stories about Voldemort and her.

Romance novels are written, clearly inspired by them, filthy things littering the shelves of disreputable books stores, about a dark lord that while changed enough, still heavily sounds like Voldemort, or at least the version of Voldemort civilians liked to imagine, and the protagonist is always a woman of means, from a good family, trapped in a loveless marriage, with an abusive husband, that is now pulled into a dark, and filthy affair with the dark lord.

Bellatrix cackles whenever she hears about these books, strangely popular with middle-aged women, read in secret, with fake covers.

Even his mother reads them, because she always enjoyed those types of salacious books.

"Traded vampires for dark lords?" Sirius once mocked her when he found her with the book.

"Want to see what the fuss is about," she drawls. "I'm out of vampire novels, anyway. I read them all."

"Switch to werewolves," Sirius suggests.

She makes a face, disgust written all over it. "Those are animals. All that fur and dirt, and beards." She shudders. "Vampires at least look well groomed, are usually rich, and were once proper wizards."

Though werewolf erotica type books are another guilty pleasure of some witches, that same ones that demand werewolves be hunted and killed, but read filthy things when alone in their manors. Sirius heard there are also romance novels with centaurs, but he hopes that was just Bellatrix taking the piss.

Centaurs, really. He can understand werewolves and vampires, but *centaurs*?

Bellatrix knows about Felix, of course. Sirius tells her everything, and she demands he recounts even the most intimate of details, claiming she's living vicariously through him and that he owes her entertainment.

He knows better than to point out she can find entertainment of her own; Bellatrix is not bound by any Vow, and she could easily find someone to warm her bed, but unlike Sirius, she's loyal to her partner.

The most she's done with anyone other than Rodolphus was kiss Sirius, but that doesn't count as cheating.

When Astrid annoys Bella, she loves to climb into Sirius' lap and kiss him right in front of Astrid.

It caused many tense situations, because Bellatrix is the only person that can get under Astrid's skin and test her otherwise unlimited patience and grace.

They fight about Orion, most of all; Astrid doesn't like how much influence Bella has over Orion, and *really* doesn't like what Bella teaches him.

The only time he saw Astrid yell was when Orion, just seven, stole Sirius' mother wand and cast a curse he shouldn't have learned for at least another decade.

"If she teaches my sons anything like that again, then I swear to you, Sirius, I will show her some curses she wouldn't much enjoy!"

"Not that I don't like you fiery," Sirius said, watching her anger with something close to arousal, because it was quite the sight, *"but there really isn't any curse Bella wouldn't know. She destroyed grown dark wizards in battle-"*

"Don't test me," Astrid warned. *"I know you suffer everything from that woman, that you think the sun revolves around her, but, by the gods, if she endangers my sons again, I'll prove to you she's as mortal as all of us, and she bleeds just as easily!"*

Bella finds it hilarious when Sirius warns her.

"No, she really meant it," he insists. "You should have seen her! Gods, I almost fell in love."

Bella rolls her eyes. "How will she defeat me? With what skills? The power of motherhood?"

"Whatever she'd do, it would be really sneaky," Sirius counters. "She'd probably poison you or something. She'll conspire with Lucius, and that's a dangerous coalition!"

Lucius is also heavily frustrated, because Bella teaches Draco things, too, and Narcissa doesn't mind, says it's the Black way, and she trusts her sister, so Lucius is left raging quietly and impotently.

Sirius is finally forced to act, because he doesn't want Bella and Astrid to actually get into a fight. He'd forgive Bella most anything, but not harming the mother of his children.

And if by some miracle Astrid hurts Bella, then Sirius would have to kill her, and how would he explain that to his sons?

So, Sirius takes Orion aside, and threatens him to never again be so reckless with a wand, and that he'll be in real trouble if Astrid gets wind of what his favourite cousin teaches him.

From everyone involved, at least Orion still fears Sirius enough to obey, so it was the simplest solution to get him under control, rather than Bella or Astrid.

(-)

"I will kill him!" he hears Bella, as soon as he enters Evy's home.

That's not good. She sounds enraged.

Evy sent her elf to the Ministry with a note demanding Sirius comes, fast.

"I will cut him into tiny little pieces, scatter him through the winds!"

Sirius bursts into the living room, to find a ranting, pacing Bellatrix.

Seated on the armchair, calmly, Andromeda follows Bella with her gaze, her hand curled around a big trunk.

"You're not killing anyone," she says. "I don't understand you. All these years, you pestered me into leaving Ted, and now you're angry?"

Sirius stops. He stares at the trunk, at Andromeda.

It finally happened.

"Yes, I wanted you to leave him! But for *him* to leave *you*? Are you joking? How dare he, the filthy, stupid animal! How dare he leave you? I will make him regret the day his parents were born!"

"He left you?" Sirius asks, and only then the sisters seem to realise he's there.

Andromeda sighs. Evy hands her a cup of tea.

"It's my fault. It was hard, anyway, has been for a while." She puts the tea down, hides her face in her hands. "We were fighting this morning, and I called him a mudblood."

"Ouch" Sirius winces.

"He *is* a fucking mudblood!" Bella snaps. "Where's the lie in that? Did he kick you out, Andy? Did he dare to throw you out of your own home-"

Andromeda laughs, muffled by her hands. "My home? You said that was a hovel, and my home was 'here'. Whatever 'here' means."

“Whatever it was, if that animal threw you out of *anything*, I’ll-”

“Bellatrix, stop!” Andromeda demands, collecting herself. She straightens her back. “You’re not killing anyone. Remember, he’s Nymphadora’s father, and she loves him. I love him-”

“Don’t you dare say that!”

“I do. I care for him, and wish him no harm. *I* was the harm, I was the one that hurt him. Stop it!”

Bellatrix opens her mouth, but before she can speak, Narcissa opens the door.

It’s the first time she’s in Evy’s home. “Is it true?” she asks, without preamble, eyeing the trunk, stepping closer to Andromeda, voice thin with hope. “It’s true? You left him? You finally came to your senses?”

“How in the world did you find out so fast?” Andromeda stares at her, shocked.

“Is it true?” Narcissa demands.

“Yes, I left him,” Andromeda says, and she meets Bella’s gaze for a second, before focusing on Narcissa again. “That is to say, I planned it so that he would leave me, because -” she hesitates, but only for a second. Andromeda was always an excellent liar. “Because I don’t want Dora to think I’m at fault here! She’ll blame him, instead, if I can say he left me.”

Narcissa throws herself at her sister, finally. So undignified, climbing over her in the armchair, hugging her close.

Bella rolls her eyes.

“I can finally show you what I’ve done to Malfoy Manor,” Cissa says, excited. She sounds like a child. “You’ll love it! All these years, I wanted to show you!”

Evy snorts. “Can I see it, too? Or only you are allowed to step into my house, Narcissa?”

It dawns on Sirius it was Evy who alerted Narcissa about the destruction of Andromeda’s marriage, even if Narcissa pretended Evy doesn’t exist for so many years.

“Fine, you can come. I don’t care,” Narcissa says, grinning, in a forgiving mood. “Such excellent news! A blessed day!”

“Cissa, have some… sympathy,” Bella says, unsure. “I know we hate the mudblood, but Andy’s marriage just ended. Don’t gloat! It’s not easy losing a husband. At least give her a day to feel sorry for herself.”

“Nonsense!” Narcissa sits on the armrest, hand around Andromeda’s shoulder. “Why feel sorry for herself? She’s right where she belongs, with her real family.”

Bella opens her mouth.

“Forget it,” Andromeda mutters.

A knock startles them all.

“I’m not expecting anyone,” Evy says, with a frown.

“That would be Father,” Andromeda explains. “I sent him a letter before I left.”

“I’ll be on my way, then,” Evy says, as they hear the elf letting Cygnus in. “Too many Blacks in one room. Can’t handle more,” she mutters, leaving just as Cygnus enters.

Like Narcissa, he seems thrilled. Of course, he expresses it differently, his face doesn’t move a muscle, but there’s something warm in his eyes. Warm-*ish*.

“Why are we all in this house?” Cygnus asks, after a second.

“Because I live here,” Bella answers.

On a different day, Cygnus would scoff at her; he hates that she’s living with Evelyn, but this day he lets it be.

“Father, I don’t know- what will happen to Nymphadora? I want to make sure I get her. I have no idea what our laws say about cases like mine, whose family she will belong to, now?”

Sirius sits on the couch, and Bella comes to sit beside him.

“There are no cases like yours,” Cygnus says. “We don’t abandon our marriages. Luckily, you weren’t married. Not by our laws. So, it’s as with any child born out of wedlock.”

“So the mudblood can take her?” Narcissa asks, scandalised. “That won’t do! Don’t worry, Andy, I’ll have Lucius-”

“*Lucius,*” Cygnus sneers. “What, I don’t exist? Sirius doesn’t exist? Why do you always think everyone needs your husband?”

“He can’t take her,” Bella says, knowledgeable about the law. “A father can make a claim, but- really, so can a grandfather.”

“Exactly. And who do you think the Wizengamot will side with?” Cygnus asks, sarcastic. “Worry not, Andromeda. Dora will stay with you.”

“If she’ll want to,” Andromeda says, a little concerned.

Cygnus waves it away. “Of course she will. Who’d pick to live with the mudblood, in that awful place?”

“It’s not awful-”

Cygnus holds his hand. “No. You’re done defending him and that muggle house, and that muggle life. It’s done.”

“The rule still stands,” Andromeda says. “I don’t want anyone badmouthing Ted in front of Dora! I don’t want anyone harming him. He’s her father-”

“Yes, we know,” Cygnus assures her. “And now we can ignore him thoroughly, no reason to spare more thoughts on him.”

Poor Ted doesn’t even try anything legally. He knows he has no chance.

Cygnus throws a little fit when Andromeda says she’d like to stay with Bella, something about two of his daughters living with a ‘stranger’, no matter Evy isn’t, and has never been, a stranger.

And they’re lucky Evy is a good woman; no one even asks her if she’s fine with Andromeda moving in, with Dora moving in, when she’s not at Hogwarts, but she accepts all this, gracefully.

Lucius names the house ‘the disgraced witches’ den’, takes Regis in his lap at Malfoy Manor, pats his back. “You’re the only man in that house. Even the elf is female. How is that going for you?”

“It’s great,” Regis says. “They all spoil me.”

“I’d trade places with you every day,” Sirius says, making Regis shudder.

“No, please, Sirius! I don’t want to trade places! I don’t want to live with Mrs Black!”

Sirius doesn’t need to ask which Mrs Black; there’s only one that scares children.

Everyone takes bets on how long Lucius will wait before trying to marry Andromeda to some widower he pulls out of nowhere.

Astrid wins the bet; she guessed three months, and she’s right.

When Andromeda refuses, Lucius tries again to pass the man to Evy, to no success.

“You can marry my daughter off,” Corban offers, seeing Lucius so frustrated. “Gods know, if anyone can find her a good match, it’s you.”

It does cheer Lucius up.

To everyone’s surprise, when Dora gets fed up with both her parents, in fits of teenaged angst, she goes to Cygnus and Druella, hangs out with them for a while.

“What is wrong with her?” Narcissa wonders.

Andromeda and Bella shrug, utterly perplexed. All three of them did their best to escape that house as soon as possible, and yet Dora loves it there.

She still wants to work with dragons, and, come summer, Cygnus actually takes her to Romania for two weeks, gets her permission to hang around the dragon enclosures.

“She broke Father,” Bella comments. “He hasn’t told Dora women shouldn’t work in ages. He even lets her wear trousers in his home!”

(-)

“Father, Orion is bullying me!” Marvolo complains, hurrying over.

“Bully back,” Sirius says, caught in a conversation with Lucius, Corban and Regulus.

It’s Lucius’ birthday, a grander event than most state affairs.

The Manor is busy, filled with people wanting to stay on Lucius’ good side, which is most people.

The kids are outside, with a handful of exhausted elves and wine fulled adults that draw the short straws and are stuck with guarding duty.

Marvolo returns in five minutes, holding his nose.

“Didn’t go well,” he informs Sirius.

With a sigh, Sirius takes his hand away, checks his face. “Not broken. You’re fine.”

“He’s nasty!” Marvolo yells. “I hate him!”

“Big brothers are mean,” Regulus offers, and Lucius laughs. “Just hide away for a while, until he gets distracted by something or someone else.”

“Listen to Regulus, he has experience,” Corban suggests, with a smirk.

Marvolo looks between Sirius and Regulus. “Father bullied you?”

“Gods, are second sons always so sensitive?” Sirius asks.

“He *still* bullies me.” Regulus pats Marvolo’s back. “Best get used to it.”

“Not fair!” Marvolo groans.

“Team up with some other midgets and jump him,” Sirius offers.

“Yeah, so he can kill me when we’re back in Grimmauld and I’m alone.”

“Don’t be dramatic, he won’t kill you. Fight back, or stop whining. Also, stop snitching on him. It will only make things worse.”

“Definitely,” Regulus nods in agreement.

They both know that when Regulus told on Sirius, back when they were children, then nothing could save him from Sirius’ wrath.

Marvolo stomps away. Predictably, he goes to complain to Astrid, standing further away, caught in a conversation with Narcissa and Mrs Fudge.

From their age group, Draco, Harry, Orion and Regina are the biggest bullies on the playground. Granted, Harry is the tamest of the lot, Draco is the one that usually starts shit, and Orion and Regina are the first to escalate a verbal spat into a physical one.

Theodore, Pansy, Blaise, Marvolo, Elara and Regis are *somewhat* protected.

The rest of the kids, though, are out of luck whenever Draco gets bored, or Orion is in a bad mood.

The older children, like Flint’s son or Yaxley’s middle child, know better than to bother Draco or Orion.

Everyone knows Lucius flies off the handle if his son even as much as sheds a tear, so the other parents impressed upon their children how important it is not to upset Draco.

Sirius wouldn’t get involved in kids’ squabbles, but it seems people assume he’d take it badly if someone roughed his kids up. A pity. Sirius secretly wishes some brave child would punch Orion, at least once. The boy is practically *begging* for it.

Granted, a few months before, Elara bit his ear, and they both tumbled to the ground, scratching and hitting, until Isadora managed to separate them.

Sirius is so upset he wasn’t home to witness it.

Arcturus called Elara ‘a little bride for Orion’ since she was still in Isadora’s belly. But once his grandfather saw how Elara acts, he quickly changed his mind, and now urges Sirius to speak to Greengrass, arrange something for the man’s other daughter, whichever one isn’t already promised to Draco.

Sirius, of course, ignores him.

Worst of all, even if his grandfather changed his mind, Sirius’ mother, Bella and Isadora all tell Orion and Elara they will one day marry.

“They’re all crazy,” Sirius tells the children. “Ignore them. You’ll marry whoever you want.”

“I want to marry a dragon,” Elara say. “A dragon can fly and I can use it to burn whoever upsets me.”

“I want to marry Snuffles,” Orion declares. “I like him the best out of everyone. He’s loyal!”

“I’ll marry Mama,” Marvolo babbles. “She’s the best.”

"If Draco was a girl, I'd marry him," Harry pipes in. "I wouldn't mind living with him. We'd play quidditch all the time."

"Not whoever you want," Sirius reconsiders, when confronted with these interesting choices. "But no one will force you to marry someone you don't want."

Apparently Marvolo doesn't get what he wants from Astrid, because he stalks to one of the couches, where Sirius' mother is in a deep conversation with Abraxas.

Marvolo climbs besides her, hugs her waist, and in just a handful of minutes, his mother gets up, a thunderous expression on her face, and she heads to the gardens.

That alone was sure to make every child on that playground hate Marvolo, but to make it worse, Abraxas follows after her.

"Oh, no," Lucius mutters. "That's not good. Merlin, Sirius, your child really is a snitch!"

"Like yours is much better," Sirius shoots back.

Marvolo might have loose lips, but it's nothing compared to Draco.

"Even Draco knows better than to go to Father," Lucius hisses, panicked.

He tried to go after Abraxas, to make sure his precious Draco doesn't get yelled at, but just then Fudge gets in their way and they're forced to engage him in conversation until Lucius finds a way to politely get rid of him.

By the time they get to the gardens, it's eerily silent and orderly, like it never is when children play.

Now they're all quiet, playing nicely, sneaking scared glances in the direction of the bench Sirius' mother and Abraxas relocated.

The ones who don't look terrified, are glowering at Marvolo, the only happy kid around.

Orion, made to stand apart from the others, and with red imprints on his cheek that match Sirius' mother hand, is glaring daggers in Marvolo's direction, and Sirius just knows there'll be drama back home.

"Father," Draco says, relieved, running straight to Lucius. "Take Grandfather away! Send Aunt Walburga away, too!"

Lucius has power over many people, but Abraxas and Sirius' mother aren't included in that category, so, instead, he just takes Draco back inside with them.

(-)

Being with Felix is odd, because they're on equal standing, and Sirius has never been in such a relationship. The closest thing he ever had like that was with Marlene, but not quite.

He and Felix are both just as rich, from important, noble families, they have influence and power over their respective Ministries.

They have the same interests, the same priorities. Felix understands all about duty, about family, and what sacrifices one must make for it. He, too, was married off young, his children already grown by the time he met Sirius.

"While family should always be the priority, it's important to find something outside of it, something just for you, otherwise you go mad," he once told Sirius.

"I gave up everything," Sirius said. "I have nothing of my own."

He gave up his bike, he gave up music, drunken nights, friends, he gave up everything that was once Sirius.

Though, of course, that's not just because of the duty he has to the Blacks.

It's because many of those things remind him of Voldemort.

For a while, Felix becomes Sirius' thing, just for him. Felix becomes the person with whom Sirius is *Sirius*, and not the Head of the most Ancient and Noble family; with Felix he's not husband, or father, or grandson, or cousin.

It's Sirius that ends it, after two years. He ends it after Felix tells Sirius he loves him.

Sirius realises he might love him back, or at least something close to it, and the realisation comes with such *visceral* fear, the likes of which he hadn't felt since-

So he leaves, he never answers any of Felix' letters, and prefers to suffer missing him, but knowing he has control over the pain that relationship would have inevitably brought, one way or another.

Missing Felix is not the same as missing Voldemort, anyway. Not even close. Nothing compares to the agony of that Samhain night, to the pain he caries with him ever since.

It's safer to leave Felix, go back to Astrid, who can't leave him, who won't disappear, who can't hurt him, because while he gave her his time, his home, his vault, his children, his name, he never gave her what remains of his soul, so she cannot really hurt him, no matter what she does.

He stars having the same old nightmare again, finding James dead by the stairs, Voldemort dead in Harry's nursery.

It always comes back, from time to time, but after he leaves Felix, it haunts him nightly, months on end, though eventually he's at least spared of the James part, is left only with

finding Voldemort dead.

(-)

His grandfather Pollux dies in 1990, three days into the New Year.

Sirius is dreaming, an unsettling feeling washing over him, as he sees a star falling from the sky, a dog whining in pain on the ground, when his mother wakes him.

She's crying, and Sirius' heartbeat, already elevated from his dream, goes wild.

It's the first time he sees her in her nightgown, since she had her *episode*, so he shoots up from bed, holds her shoulders.

"Are you alright? What is it?"

She shakes, fat tears rolling down her face, genuine grief, unlike Sirius had ever seen before. There's no anger, no scorn, no frustration, just pure grief, and for one mad second, it makes her look innocent; it makes her look young, even with her hair half white.

"Father," she says, voice shaking, breaking. "Father died."

She shows him a letter, scrunched up in her fist, and Sirius takes it, reads his grandmother's handwriting, as his mother curls to his chest and cries, and cries, and cries.

They bring him back to Grimmauld the next day, after they arrange for a Ministry Portkey and the necessary paperwork.

They lay him down in their formal dining room, and Arcturs, Cygnus, Regulus and Sirius stand guard at the head of the coffin, as people come to say their final goodbyes to Pollux Black.

It's mostly an old crowd, yet Avery comes too, who has probably seen the old man a handful of times when he was a young boy. Parkinson, Grabbe, Goyle, Yaxley and his daughter, an eighteen-year-old wonder, beautiful and graceful, who looks at Sirius with such sadness and truthfulness when she expresses her condolences.

They came to support Sirius, not to say good bye to a man they hardly knew, and Sirius takes note of who is missing, who shows up, in what order. He takes note, because Arcturus whispers in his ear about it.

"It's always in times like these where you count your allies," he says.

"Can't you stop plotting for five gods' damned minutes?" Cygnus snarls at him, when there's a lull in the visitors. "My father is dead!"

Arcturus looks unimpressed. “Your father knew the importance of these things. He held the fort for us in France, did his duty to our family, kept an eye on our enemies there, and gathered us allies. Mourn in private, in your bed, in your wife’s arms. Do not grieve in public. Shameful that I have to tell you this at your age.”

His mother is inconsolable for weeks. Cygnus, thankfully, offers to keep his mother in his home, even though it is technically the duty of the eldest child to look after a parent. But Cygnus takes Grandmother Irma with him, so at least Sirius’ mother can grieve in peace.

Grandmother Irma, tough and scary and never bothered, who refused to attend her own son’s funeral when Alphard died, seems lost, as the weeks pass. She’s still stern, back straight as a rod, eyes hard as steel, but sometimes, Bella says, she calls for Pollux to *‘come and have a look at the newspaper, this world is going to the dogs, husband’*.

Pollux’s death marks the beginning of a new era for their family.

He is the first to die.

(-)

Regulus looks pale, and that’s saying something, because they’re always pale, all of them, but now it’s as if something sucked out whatever little colour Regulus held on his features.

He barges into Sirius’ office, his eyes wide.

“I went to Crouch’s house, to pester him about an upcoming vote,” he starts. “And- Sirius, I *swear* I heard Barty’s voice at some point! It was faint, but- it’s Barty! I’d recognise him everywhere.”

Sirius would dismiss anyone saying something so outlandish, but he would never dismiss his brother.

They call Lucius. They plot about it.

In the end, Sirius sends Kreacher over, with a message for Crouch with some Wizengamot affairs, orders the elf to find a way to investigate, using that unknown, misunderstood magic elves have.

When he returns, he gives the verdict.

“There’s someone else living in that house, beside old Crouch,” Kreacher assures them. “Kreacher knows, even if Kreacher couldn’t see. Must be invisible, but Kreacher felt another wizard! Winky is behaving strangely! She wanted Kreacher out of there, she was scared and twitchy.”

Apparently, Crouch is not as law abiding as they all assumed. Even Crouch defended his son, as he was scoffing loudly at Arcturus and Abraxas for defending their own. Crouch, *somehow*, got his son out of Azkaban, all hush-hush.

Lucius wants to use this to blackmail Crouch into doing what they want, for the foreseeable future.

Regulus wants Barty.

"If we get him," Lucius warns. "Not only would we lose valuable blackmail material, but I am positive Barty would go…looking for a certain someone."

And we don't want that, goes without saying.

That night, as Sirius is on the roof, where he always feels best, even if he's not using his magic, Regulus climbs after him.

He lies besides Sirius.

"You know, Barty is also our cousin; second-cousin, but-"

"Everyone is our damn second cousin," Sirius says.

Regulus falls silent for a few minutes.

Since Bella spoke of Mars, Sirius often looks at it, studies it carefully, sometimes with a telescope. It truly doesn't mean anything.

Yet it does look brighter, each year.

"If James was trapped somewhere, kept captive, would you leave him there?"

Sirius sighs. "Fuck you." Now that he made the James comparison…"Fine. But what to do with him? I'm certain he will want to go after Voldemort."

"Once I tell him Voldemort was a half-blood," Regulus sneers, "he'll reconsider."

Sirius laughs. He remembers the disgust on Regulus' face when he finally told him his precious lord was a half-blood.

"Not everyone is as crazy about that as you are," he reminds his brother. "Most of us knew, and we still followed him. And fine, yeah, I'm a blood traitor, but Lucius isn't. Rodolphus and Bella aren't. And, trust me, Barty knew, too-"

"No! He couldn't have known! He'd have told me."

"He wouldn't have told you, because he knows how insane you are with the blood purity shit. Trust me, he knows. Barty was close to Voldemort."

Sirius still can't forget Voldemort protecting Barty at that meeting.

Many times, Voldemort sometimes left the cabin, saying Barty called him.

"Something important?"

"No. On occasion, he feels suffocated by his father and needs guidance," Voldemort would respond.

If Barty would have been anything other than *Barty*, Sirius would have grown jealous. As it was, Voldemort was almost…paternal, in the way he spoke of Barty.

"If he wants to go after Voldemort... we can keep him somewhere safe," Regulus says. "It will be better than whatever his father is doing to him. It must be awful, if he is keeping Barty docile. Probably those potions they shoved down your throat." Regulus' tone colours with anger.

Ever since they married Sirius off under the potions, Regulus has grown very cold towards their grandfather.

Sirius sits, turns to grab Regulus' shoulder. "It was for my own good," he says. "Grandfather and Mother did the right thing."

I'd have killed myself otherwise, he almost says. He would have said it, back then. But he is the Head of House. And Heads of House have no weaknesses.

Regulus sneers. "I know they do love you. I know that. However…questionable their decisions. But Crouch doesn't love Barty. He never did."

"He loves him enough to get him out of Azkaban."

"No." Regulus looks adamant. "I don't know what happened, but trust me, Sirius, that wasn't love. Crouch never did a single kind thing for Barty."

(-)

They get Lucius on board. "We can still blackmail Crouch with it," Sirius promised. "Doesn't matter he loses Barty. We still know he had Barty, he helped him escape."

Sirius thinks of asking for Bella's help, but then discards it. Bella still wants Voldemort, she still loves him; it's only that she loves Sirius and his sons, more. She struggles with it, yet remains loyal to Sirius, after she saw exactly how fucked Sirius was, with the Horcrux, but it's not a good idea putting her in contact with another Voldemort fanatic.

Kreacher is part of the team. He'll be needed to subdue Winky.

And Greyback and his youngest son will incapacitate Barty and kidnap him, once Winky is helpless.

Lucius and Sirius make sure Crouch is stuck in a meeting.

It goes smoothly.

In less than an hour, Barty is sitting on a couch, hugging Regulus, confused, disorientated.

“The Imperius,” Lucius says, out loud, and casts the counter curse, as Sirius is dealing with Greyback, handing him trunks of potions.

The Imperius- that’s far, far worse than any calming potion.

It’s been years since Greyback and his pack moved on privately owned land, in the muggle world.

Sirius, Lucius and Nott bought acres of it. They did put out those muggle signs, warning not to trespass.

Sadly, some muggles ignore them, and …Greyback’s pack gets a little bigger when the muggles survive the transformation. Or they just get eaten.

Hartwood gets an outrageous amount of gold to pay a bi-yearly visit to the pack, always with Sirius at his side, to check for the health of the pack, the children mostly.

They don’t need food, they can hunt on their own quite efficiently, but Sirius offers them potions, and warm clothes; he procures wands for those that can do magic. Sirius also persuaded Greyback into allowing him to give the children chocolate and toys, and other small comforts.

“I don’t want them soft!” Greyback growled, but whatever monster he is, he did soften a tad when all the young children begged him to let them have the sweets.

Because he doesn’t need to relocate so often, no one searches for them there; the werewolves started building small cabins, to keep the most vulnerable warm, the sick or the children.

There’s something like…not respect, no, but there’s something in the way Greyback looks at Sirius these days, less hostile than before.

He still despises Lucius and any other wizards.

“They’re helping, too,” Sirius reminds him.

“Because you made them, dog.” Dog is not an insult, even if it sounds like one. If anyone else would call Sirius dog, he’d have them killed, but from the wolves, it’s just a fact. “They abhor me, and my pack, so I reject them in turn.”

Sirius doesn’t despise werewolves. Thrice, he found the time and the will to actually run with them on a full moon. It did him good- it was fun. And Sirius doesn’t do many fun, mindless, things these days, just because he wants to.

As for what Greyback does for Sirius, from time to time- invaluable, really. Sirius doesn't often ask for assistance, but when he asks something, Greyback always delivers. Like he delivered Barty.

Who, as soon as the Imperius is lifted, tells Regulus, Lucius and Sirius how he got out of Azkaban, of his mother's sacrifice.

And then he starts muttering about their lord.

Which is why Regulus decided to have him brought to one of their properties, warded with Black magic.

They don't need an elf, or a curse, to keep Barty trapped inside the wards. Despite Regulus claiming Barty is their second cousin- oh, he might have some Black blood, but not *enough*, nowhere near as much as Regulus, who powered the blood wards. No one other than a full Black will get in and out of those without Regulus' permission.

Because Sirius wanted to spare Winky, ordered Kreacher not to kill her, just subdue her, she tells Crouch Kreacher was involved in stealing Barty.

But Crouch can't do anything. Not like he can complain to Aurors Sirius stole his son, a son that Crouch stole from Azkaban, while he condemned so many others to that fate.

At the Ministry, Lucius often alludes to it, in a way that makes no sense to those that don't know, but oh, Crouch gets it. He suddenly lost his appetite in fighting Lucius at every turn.

And then, he quits his job, when he realises he'd otherwise be forced to do whatever Lucius wants.

He even stops coming to Wizengamot votes.

"Well, that was easy," Lucius comments, satisfied with having gotten rid of Crouch, a staunch Dumbledore, no murder involved. "Good job, Regulus!"

Regulus visits Barty daily; sometimes, he spends more time with Barty than with his wife.

I'd have spent more time with James than with Astrid, Sirius thinks, but when he actually examines that thought…no. No, he wouldn't have.

He loved James so much, but he made his peace with his death. Astrid is the mother of his children; after the boys, she's Sirius' top priority.

"You are a good husband," Thor once said, eyeing Sirius with something like pleasure. *"Astrid is the only one of my daughters that has no complaints about her new family. I made the right choice."*

Not that his other sons in law dare upset Thor's daughters too much, but Astrid tells him Thor sometimes needs to….intervene in those marriages, if his daughters come home complaining to him about one thing or another.

Sirius cheats on Astrid, is true, but she doesn't know, and he still thinks she wouldn't care. Otherwise, he'd never do anything to upset her. And she never does anything to upset him.

She still remains the only person in his life to have never even irritate him slightly.

Sometimes, when Sirius says he's annoyed with a fellow Wizengamot member, but not annoyed enough to warrant a feud, Astrid takes it upon herself to antagonise the man's wife, and ruin that particular's family social life for a while, until Sirius' grievances pass.

And if someone's wife dares to annoy Astrid- though very few dare- Sirius makes their husband pay for it.

(-)

At some point, it seems all the children decide to collectively obsess over Voldemort.

It's not unexpected.

When Sirius was a young boy, everyone was obsessed with Grindelwald, the fierce, felled dark lord.

Dark lords have an inherent appeal for children raised within families that practice the Arts, and coincidently supported said dark lord.

Lucius is the most bothered about it, concerned with his reputation. He spent the better part of decade terrorising everyone that dared called him a Death Eater. Arthur Weasley once nodded when Smith whispered Lucius 'got away with it', and since that day, Weasley has been stuck in his department. It's a running joke in their circle, the way Lucius makes sure to keep Weasley down.

Smith, on the other hand, mysteriously disappeared.

No one else has publicly accused Lucius of anything since then.

Sirius doesn't give a fuck about people whispering he's been a Death Eater. It's the truth, anyway. He doesn't mind the reputation, not one bit.

Lucius is cautious; it's in his nature. It's not in Sirius'.

Draco, like most children, was told in a backwards way by his tutors, that Death Eaters only defended the old way, the pure way, from the nasty muggleborns and blood traitors.

No one praises Voldemort in front of children, but the children do understand Death Eaters were Voldemort's followers.

By default, that makes Voldemort the 'good guy'.

Same as Grindelwald *'was only wrong because he lost, Sirius',* as his tutor once told him. *'It was not a win for wizard kind the day he was defeated. It was a win for blood traitors'.*

Naturally, the children are interested in Voldemort.

Sirius doesn't get why this surprises Lucius and Regulus and Narcissa.

"We were playing Death Eaters and Aurors!" the children explain, confused why they're being yelled at.

Astrid looks on in bewilderment when Narcissa actually screams at Draco. She's even more surprised when Draco goes begging to his daddy, but Lucius rebukes him for the first time ever.

"Weren't you all Death Eaters?" she asks, in whispered Norwegian. "What is the problem?"

"Do you want to have me thrown in Azkaban?" Lucius asks Draco. "How do you think this would look if people found out my son parades around with a Dark Mark on his arm? They'll think you learned it from me!"

"But you were a Death Eater," Draco says, frowning, forgetting to cry for a second.

"Yes, exactly," Astrid mutters, still in Norwegian, holding Marvolo in her lap.

Regulus doesn't scream, but he scolds Elara something awful, a bit further away.

At first, Elara fights back; when she realises it won't help, she tries crying.

Evy doesn't lose it on the kids. Instead, she asks the worst possible question. "Who drew these, anyway?" She examines the Dark Mark on Regina's arm. "They're strangely…well done."

Oh, yes, they are.

Only then does it seem to hit Lucius, too. A vein throbs on his forehead. "I am going to have a word with Bellatrix!"

"It's not her fault!" Orion is quick to defend his favourite Aunt. Not that she's actually an aunt to him, but it's just easier for his sons to call her that, instead of cousin, since Draco and Dora call her Aunt. "We begged her! She didn't even want to!"

Draco, the little cunning shit that he is, senses the opportunity. "No, actually, she did want to. She *made* me, Father! It's all Auntie's fault."

This strategy strangely works, and both Narcissa and Lucius forget to be upset with Draco and go searching for Bellatrix instead.

Regulus joins them.

Draco sighs, relieved.

“Liar!” Regina accuses him.

Draco waves it away. “It’s alright, Auntie doesn’t mind. She says I can always blame stuff on her if I get in trouble! She can handle Mother! I can’t!”

Harry is quiet beside Sirius, who has an arm around him. Harry didn’t play at all. He claims he had a tummy ache.

Smart kid. Bad liar.

“I tried the crying thing, and it didn’t work!” Elara shouts at Isadora. “You said it works better than arguing with him!”

“It does, love, but you can’t do both at once. Pick a method and stick to it. Try only crying. I promise it works.”

“Ugh.” She rolls her eyes. “I hate crying. It’s pathetic!”

“Who played Aurors?” Sirius asks.

“*Ew*, no one!” Orion says with a grimace. He did overhear some of Sirius…rants against Aurors. “We made the elves pretend they’re Aurors! Not like any of us would lower ourself to that level!”

“Why are they so mad?” Regis asks Sirius.

“Lucius is mad because he’s old, and he doesn’t remember being a kid,” Sirius says. “As for Regulus and Cissa…well, they are mad all the time, so-”

“Sirius,” Evy hisses.

“What?”

She sighs, standing. “Come along.” She gathers the twins and herds them out of the room.

“Are you mad, Father?” Marvolo asks.

“No.”

“Told you he wouldn’t be mad,” Orion boasts.

“Just in case you are, Orion forced me to play!” Marvolo adds.

“By the gods, I’m going to-” Orion stats shouting, but Sirius cuts over him.

“Let’s go home then,” he says, and Marvolo finally climbs out of his mother’s lap.

“Don’t leave me here, alone!” Draco whines. “They’ll find Auntie, she’ll anger them even more, and then they’ll come back and scream at me! Even Father! I can’t believe he *screamed* at me!” He sniffs, big fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Kiddo, you’re really too old to cry anytime something doesn’t go your way,” Sirius says, mildly.

“Elara cried, too!”

“She’s a girl!” Orion points out.

“She’s younger,” Sirius explains, but then he stops, because Draco is Lucius’ son, and apparently Lucius is fine with this crying business.

“He can express his emotions. It does him good,” Lucius said, when Sirius brought it up. Gods know where he heard such drivel. Lucius certainly wasn’t raised to ‘express his emotions’.

“Anyway, you can come with us, yeah?”

The tears go away, and Draco smirks, as Sirius leads them all to the fireplace.

They find Bella in Grimmauld. Draco immediately goes to her.

“Mother and Father lost their marbles!” he complains. “I told them you made me do it! They’re looking for you!”

Bella sniggers. "Oh, no, what shall I do? Who wants ice-cream?”

“ME!” All the kids yell in unison, making Isadora flinch, complain about a headache.

“You have a stomach ache, remember?” Sirius asks Harry, pulling him back by the shoulder, gently.

“Oh.” Harry bites his lips. “I feel better now, actually.”

“Best not risk making it hurt again,” Sirius says. “Follow me.”

“Oh, no!” Orion says. “Is Harry in trouble? Why is Father taking him to the office?”

“I will give you *whatever* you want if you take them out of the house,” Isadora bargains with Bella. “*Please.* Whatever you want!”

Some people snark that Isadora is lazy, because she can’t handle one child. Those people don’t know Elara too well. She’s as much trouble as all of Sirius’ kids combined.

She takes after Bella, really. Or after Sirius’ mum. Same thing, in the end.

Their voices grow distant, as they head to the kitchen and Sirius and Harry head to the office.

“What did I do wrong?” Harry asks.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Sirius assures him, taking him to the couch. He sits, but Harry doesn’t, stands in front of him. “Why didn’t you play? And don’t give me the stomach ache answer again, otherwise you’re not eating sweets for a week.”

Harry sighs. “I just didn’t feel like playing.”

“Try again.”

Harry scratches the back of his head, messing up his hair. Exactly like James used to. It makes Sirius’ heart swell, every time it happens.

“I didn’t want to upset you. I figured it was a big deal.” He shrugs. “I mean, it’s fine for the others, but I know the dark lord killed James and…I don’t know. I don’t really understand how…” he trails off.

“Why don’t you ask me?”

“You said I was too young to ask.”

Sirius said that, a couple of years ago, when Harry first asked why he’s the Boy-Who-Lived, what does it mean, and why Voldemort killed his parents.

He was only seven years old, so Sirius said he’s too young. He was pissed, anyway, that Harry heard the stupid ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ nonsense, especially since Sirius is so vigilant about who talks to Harry, who is allowed near him. But, he supposes it’s getting harder and harder to control what children hear from their homes, or from the playground, what they repeat to Harry.

“You were. Not you’re not. We can talk about it.”

Harry bites his lip. “It’s just that I don’t understand. You were a Death Eater. No?”

“Yes.”

Gods, this will suck. But Sirius can’t delay this conversation anymore, not when Harry is already hearing it from others.

“Like Lucius, and Bella, and all the others,” Harry checks, unsure.

“Yes.”

“But you loved James. And he wasn’t a Death Eater. He was against the dark lord?”

“Yes.”

“And Lily was a mud-”

“Harry!”

“Muggleborn. And I am a half-blood. But you love me, too. Lucius likes me! So- I just don’t understand how- how all of that can be true at once.”

Sirius pats the seat beside him, and Harry takes it. He looks up at Sirius, expectantly.

“When the war started, I, too, fought against Voldemort. I was on the same side with James. There was this resistance movement, called the Order of the Phoenix-”

“That’s an awesome name!” Harry whispers, with a smile.

“Yeah, it is. But see, I wasn’t-” Sirius stops, takes a breath. “I didn’t really believe in what the Order was preaching.”

“What was the Order preaching?”

Shit.

“They said that muggleborns are equal to purebloods; and-” *Fuck.* “See, I do believe we all have the same right to practice magic. You know that, yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry nods. “Old Mrs Rolwle always calls you a blood traitor because of this!”

“That fuc-” Sirius coughs. He can’t do much about Rowle. She’s ancient and losing her mind. Sirius isn’t yet as hardened as to hurt or kill an old hag. “Anyway. I believe in that. I believe in their right to exist in our world.”

Harry nods.

“But some people in the Order- not all, mind you, but most- they don’t want us, purebloods of the old way, to exist here anymore, either.”

He’s stretching it. Sure, many people hate the old families, and with good reason at that, but no one ever tried to exterminate them.

However, this is all he can say when he’s trying to present two sides of the war, when it was only ever one aggressor and everyone else just defending themselves.

And he can’t say that to Harry; for many reasons, the main one being he’s surrounded, loved, and loves, in turn, the aggressors.

Still, he feels bad, so he adds: “Not that they wanted us dead, or anything like that. But they just want to replace our traditions, to let go of a big part of our culture.” That is, at least, closer to the truth. “And I don’t like that.”

Harry frowns. “Yeah, I don’t like the sound of that, either. I love our traditions!”

“Yes. So I fought with the Order, but I didn’t fully agree with them.”

“Why would James-”

“James was only interested in defending muggleborns, and half-bloods, and any innocents that was harassed. That’s who your father was; he always wanted to help others. And, of course, he was especially interested in protecting your mother. I was mostly interested in protecting James and Lily, too. Not about the other stuff.”

Harry nods.

“But then…” *Fuck, this is hard.* “Then, I met Voldemort.”

Harry swallows.

Sirius steels himself. “And even if I didn’t believe in his cause, either, I joined him.”

“Why? Because Bella and Lucius and Regulus were on his side?” Harry guesses.

Say yes. It’s easier to say yes.

“No. I considered it, trust me. Plenty of times, but no, it wasn’t that.”

Harry frowns. “You loved James more than Regulus? Because you fought on James’ side, for him, yet not on-”

“It’s not about loving one more than another; I loved them both as brothers. It’s just that James needed more protection. Regulus had entire families behind him. James had nothing. And- well, truth be told, I liked James better. Like you love Marvolo, but you like Draco and Orion better, yes?”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, I get it.”

“Good.” Sirius smiles at him. He half hopes Harry forgot-

“So why did you join the dark lord, if not for Regulus?”

“Voldemort,” Sirius says, stalling for time. “You can call him Voldemort.”

Harry winces. “Everyone knows bad things happened to those that uttered his name.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “It was a Taboo, put in use towards the end of the war. Saying the name never hurt anyone, just helped Death Eaters track who uttered it, if need arose.”

Harry stares at him, undeterred, waiting.

“I joined him because I believed in him. Not in the war, not in - I believed in him.“

Harry doesn’t spit on him, doesn’t yell at him- and, of course, he wouldn’t. Harry doesn’t have enough knowledge for that kind of judgment. He’s raised in an environment where Voldemort and the Death Eaters were champions of the old ways, heroes that fought for what is right.

But that would have been James’ reaction, and this is almost like confessing to James.

“And I thought I could protect James and Lily, too. I thought they would be spared.” He breathes in. “I was wrong. And as soon as Voldemort turned his eyes on them, I left him. But I couldn’t protect them, regardless.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, and he scoots closer, places a hand on Sirius’ knee.

He's so empathic, so kind. He's such a beautiful, wonderful child, and now he's comforting Sirius for having loved the man that tried to kill him.

Love. There's no past tense for that, his self hate informs him.

Sirius brushes it off. He forces himself to smile at Harry.

"Do you understand now?"

Harry nods. "Yes. But- well, there's another thing."

"Go on."

"The Boy-Who-Lived stuff. People say I stopped the dark lord, but how could I have stopped him? I was just a baby?"

"You didn't. People want a hero, they want a story, they want miracles. You didn't do anything, Harry."

"Yeah, that's what I told Theo. I talked about it with Draco and Orion, and they agree that it can't be true. I mean, I barely got the locked attic door to open, on my fifth try-ooops!" He covers his mouth with his hand.

Sirius smiles, and it's a testament to how much he adores Harry, that he can genuinely smile, while discussing the worst night of his life.

"I didn't hear that," he says. "And Kreacher certainly didn't tell me you stole mum's wand while she was sleeping the other week."

"Ugh, *Kreacher!*" Harry makes a face. "But yeah, it's not like I'm such a great wizard or anything! I barely opened a door! How was I supposed to have stopped the most powerful dark lord ever? It sounds silly!"

"First of all, you are a great wizard," Sirius says, patting him on the back. "All of you are, because I'm raising you to be great wizards. And great wizard doesn't always mean great power. Just a great person."

Harry rolls his eyes. "Lame," he whispers.

"And, yes. It's silly. You didn't do anything."

"Then how did he die?"

"It was Harry's mother," his own mother once said. *"This is ancient magic, Sirius. The bond between a mother and a child is a force of nature. If a woman gives her life for her baby, she transfers protection onto the child."*

"That's what Dumbledore says. That it was love."

"Even a broken clock is right twice a day. Besides, it's not only love. It's the willingness to trade your life; the sacrifice."

"But so many women died for their kids, and those weren't protected."

She hums. "She had a choice, most likely. Was there any chance Riddle would have been willing to spare her, but she chose death, anyway?"

Sirius blinks. Everything slots into place. "Yes. Yes, he might have had reasons to spare her, to offer her the chance to save herself."

For Snape.

It fills Sirius with rage, that Voldemort would spare Lily for Snape, but not James, for Sirius.

"This isn't a spell, or a ritual. You don't need a wand, or a potion or anything else. This isn't something specific one learns from a book." She shrugs. "Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, and no one knows why, but this is magic given to us, mothers. Just ask your Aunt. Druella spent her youth exploring sacrifices, dabbling in that unknown side of the Arts. Any human sacrifice is Dark, and Dark magic is powerful. Giving your life willingly will have consequences. It's how we power our strongest curses. Whoever cursed our bloodline, for example, must have been a woman. A mother, grieving for her children. A woman that willingly gave her life for revenge. Your mudblood might not have known Dark magic, but if she offered her life, if she made that sacrifice…I wager that is what saved the boy."

"He was a famous Dark Arts practitioner," Sirius tells Harry. "And the Arts are dangerous and volatile; a mistake and your life is forfeit."

"What is forfeit?"

"Dead," Sirius clarifies, for this purpose. "And you'll hear other silly stories, maybe. Some people will gossip that Voldemort was after you that night."

"*Me?*" Harry's eyes go so wide, they touch his hairline.

"Voldemort went after your parents, because they were standing in his way, because they would never bow down. That's all there was to it."

Sirius doesn't want Harry to feel any responsibility- for *anything*; for his parents' deaths, for Sirius' misery, for ending the war.

Harry is such a good kid, he'd feel guilty if he thought all those things happened because of him.

And, most importantly, Voldemort will come back, one day. And people will want Harry to stand in his way.

That is not going to happen. Not on Sirius' watch.

“But, as I said, people like good stories, so you’ll hear a lot of nonsense. Ignore it. Ignore it like you ignore everything they say about us.”

Harry nods. “Yeah. It sounds stupid, anyway. How can people believe that?” He shakes his head. “I hope none of my friends think that! That I was the one to stop the dark lord and because of me their grandfathers or fathers lost the war-”

“Of course not. Everyone likes you, Harry.” If people don’t like Harry, they know better than to show it. Sirius wouldn’t tolerate it.

Harry smiles. “Yeah. Well, except Abraxas and Mrs Rowle-”

“Fuck them, they don’t like anyone.”

Harry giggles. “That’s a bad word!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sirius waves it away.

“So, I could have played with the rest and you wouldn’t have been upset with me?”

“It’s just a game, Harry,” Sirius hugs him. “Lucius is right, however. It’s not wise to play these games when people other than family are watching.”

“It was just family there, really!”

“I know. Just saying, for future reference. Do you have more questions?”

“No. Not about that. But, can I eat ice-cream, now?”

“Go ahead.”

(-)

“You do remember Voldemort killed Harry’s parents, don’t you?” Sirius asks Orion, later that night, when he goes to put him to bed.

And to remove the fake Dark Mark.

Bella really charmed it well. It took a few tries to get rid of Marvolo’s, without irritating his skin.

“I know that,” Orion says, propped on his pillows, with a yawn.

“And you didn’t think it might upset him? Playing Death Eater?”

Orion shakes his head. “Not really. You and Mum are Harry’s actual parents. Harry loves you, not the first ones.”

“If only it were that simple,” Sirius mutters.

“It is that simple. Harry’s our brother, you and Mum raised him; the other parents are dead, and Harry never met them. He doesn’t miss them. You miss them.”

Sirius takes his arm, rolls back the sleeve. He feels a jerk in his stomach, seeing it on Orion’s arm.

“Father?”

“Yes?” Sirius pulls out his wand, places the tip on the mark.

“What was he like? The dark lord?”

For some reason, Sirius feels more uncomfortable talking about Voldemort with Orion, than he did with Harry.

He vanishes the fake mark, and spends a few more seconds staring at the unblemished skin, innocent flesh.

“I’m sure Bella told you.”

“She didn’t. When we ask, she tells us to ask our fathers.”

Sirius lets go of his hand, tucks Orion in.

“Pansy said she found some old newspapers in her father’s office. She said she read the dark lord had red eyes. Is that true?”

Voldemort’s eyes flash into his mind. The way they looked at Sirius, the way-

“Somewhat, yes.”

“He had *somewhat* red eyes?”

“It’s hard to describe them.” It really is.

“We all looked everywhere, but there’s no picture of him. Do you have one?”

Clearly, they didn’t look through Regulus’ old stuff.

“I don’t.”

Orion sighs in disappointment. “What about Death Eater masks? We heard about those, and asked Bella to show us, but she says she can’t get to hers, because it’s in Lestrange Manor. Do you have yours?”

“No.”

“What happened to it?”

“Grandfather burned it.”

“Ugh, Grandfather always ruins everything fun!”

“War isn’t *fun,*” Sirius snaps. “It’s not a game. People died in it. My friends. My family.”

Orion sinks into the blankets, wide eyed. “I’m sorry, Father. I didn’t mean-”

Sirius huffs, annoyed with himself. “That’s alright.” He ruffles Orion’s hair. “And what did I tell you about apologising?”

“Blacks don’t apologise,” Orion says. “But you’re a Black, too, so it’s fine.”

Sirius bends and kisses his forehead.

“I only ask because everyone says *he* was the greatest man in the world. And that can’t be true, because-”

“He wasn’t,” Sirius cups his face. “My father was the greatest man in the world.”

“No,” Orion argues, determined. “You are the greatest man in the world.”

Sirius hasn’t cried in a long, long time. And it certainly wouldn’t do to cry in front of his son.

Yet he feels his eyes stinging.

He never believed he would ever be as great as his father, who is on such a high pedestal, unreachable, untouchable; all his life, he wanted to be like his father, yet he felt judged, he felt everyone that would compare them will find Sirius lacking.

But now, as Orion looks at him with such love and trust, Sirius realises he has become for someone what his father was for him.

He hugs Orion, lies beside him. He doesn’t speak for a handful of seconds, because he doesn’t trust his voice.

“What do you say if I sleep here, for once?” he asks, eventually. “After all the times you sneaked into my bed, I believe it would be fair, no?”

Orion laughs. “Sure, you can sleep here!” He kicks a few stuffed animas out of the bed, presumably to make room, but their entire family would have room in that bed, plus the animals.

“You haven’t come to my room in a while,” Sirius says, arranging the pillows.

“Grandfather says I’m too old to be scared of nightmares.” Orion snuggles to his chest, and Sirius throws an arm around him.

“You’re not yet eight years old. You’re not too old for anything. Well, actually, you’re old enough to realise you shouldn’t tell Grandfather some things; you know how he gets.”

“It’s hard lying to him! He always catches me!”

“I told you, he’s using Legilimency. Avoid his eyes.”

“But if I avoid his eyes, it means I’m lying. There’s no winning with him.” Orion’s voice comes muffled, speaking in Sirius’ chest. “Anyway, I doubt you miss me. Marvolo is such a baby, he probably always comes to sleep with you. Or your precious Harry-”

Sirius pulls back a little, lifts Orion’s chin, so he can look at him. “Stop that.”

“Why? Everyone in the world knows Harry is your favourite.”

“I told you, many times, you are my favourite son.”

Orion smiles, pleased, but he narrows his eyes at the same time. It’s a funny look.

“One wouldn’t guess, the way you act.”

“That was the idea,” Sirius says. “You’re my favourite son, but we agreed we won’t tell Harry and Marvolo, so they won’t feel bad, yes?”

Orion still watches him carefully for a few seconds, before he discards the suspicion, and just smiles sleepily.

Sirius doesn’t sleep much, savouring the moment. Orion is growing up so fast, and, soon enough, Sirius won’t get to sleep with him again, so he takes advantage while he still can.

Marvolo rarely comes to Sirius, preferring to go to his mother when he has a nightmare.

Harry still comes, but usually Harry is fine sleeping with Snuffles. Like with Orion, soon enough he’ll never get the opportunity to hug Harry to sleep, either.

(-)

“What do you think about another child?” he asks Astrid the following night, as they have dinner, just the two of them.

They still take at least a couple of nights a month alone, just for them, dining out.

“I would like a daughter,” she says, considering it.

“Not a daughter, *gods*, don’t jinx it!”

She raises an eyebrow. “I gave you two sons. Surely, I can have a daughter!”

“No, listen, you don’t understand. I was an absolute dog before I married you!” He still is, but hopefully she hadn’t learned of it. “And I just know all that will come back to haunt me,

and then I'll have to kill some arrogant, reckless piece of shit that breaks her heart, and I really don't want to go back to Azkaban. If we have a daughter, I won't ever let her leave the house."

Astrid rolls her eyes. "That's what father said about me and my sisters-"

"And he was right! Look who you ended up with!"

She smiles at him. "I ended up perfectly," she says, a rare softness in her eyes. "I'd be so lucky if a daughter of mine would get a husband like you."

Sirius shivers. "Gods, *no*. I changed my mind. I don't want another child. I just got a bit … odd, thinking how fast the others are growing, but I'm good now. All fine!"

"But now I want another one," she says. "Oh, how I'd like a little girl to dress up!"

"Dress Elara up," Sirius suggests. "Isadora would love to send her shopping with you."

Astrid's nose wrinkles. "That one is worse than a boy. I have more fun shopping with Marvolo than with Elara."

Regulus and Isadora are adamant they're not having another child.

"There's no need," Regulus said, when Sirius asked.

And there isn't any need, that's true. But he *wants* another one, wants to actually be present for the entire process, enjoy it, and once he voiced it, Astrid keeps mentioning every day how wonderful it would be to have a little girl.

Harry will soon go to Hogwarts, and the other two will follow before he knows it; Sirius just wants to take care of someone. Always, at all times. It helps keep him busy, focused.

Besides, now he knows what he's doing; he isn't so young anymore, he's as stable as he's going to get, and he misses having a little blighter sneaking into his bed when there's a storm outside.

"You're really going above and beyond," Regulus laughs, when the Healer confirms Astrid is pregnant.

"And you're slacking." Sirius shoves him, playfully.

"I simply value my sanity."

Astrid is only slightly disappointed to learn it's another boy, but she recovers fast, and preens under the praise everyone showers her with.

(-)

Arcturus falls ill, in late summer.

Sirius can tell when he goes to visit his grandfather, and he finds Lucretia there.

“He’s dying,” she whisperes to Sirius, on her way out.

Which was obvious, because otherwise Arcturus would have never set aside his pride, not enough to call for his long-lost daughter.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were…feeling unwell?” Sirius demands, looking at Arcturus, dressed impeccably, back as straight as always. He doesn’t look like he’s dying. “We can take you to St Mungo and-”

“Don’t make a fuss of it,” his grandfather says, as Sirius feels a pit opening up under him, pulling him in. “I’m an old man.”

“You’re not that old,” Sirius argues.

He’s ninety. Dumbledore is over a hundred, and he’s as fit as a fiddle.

“Black men don’t live too long, thank the gods. We make use of dark magic, we power our wards with dark magic. It takes a toll. We die with dignity, we don’t become wrinkled, white-haired walking corpses.” He sneers. “We die like men.”

He refuses to see a Healer. He demands he be left in peace, but in his last days he summons Sirius, Cygnus and Regulus over, to go over family matters.

At his side, Tessuth seems more alert than she’s been in decades.

“They will test you once I’m dead. You must know this. You are young, and I was here, always, to keep our enemies at bay. We have many enemies, all around the world. Pollux did the same, but he’s dead, too. With us lost, they will poke at you. It is the way of things. Old grudges will come into play, they will attempt to exact revenge for things long into the past that I, your father before you, my own father, kept in check. Now, it is your turn. Give them no quarters. Show them you are just like us.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Sirius yells, standing, no longer able to just sit there and quietly accept he’s losing his grandfather, his last pillar of strength. “Shut up! Tell me what’s wrong with you, tell me how I can help-”

“You can help me by staying calm, and listening to me, one last time. Sit, boy.”

He hadn’t called Sirius a boy since forever.

“You’ll miss my wisdom once I’m gone. You’ve grown into your powers, into your responsibilities. I am satisfied with your progress. But I dealt with many issues in your stead. Now, you must finally take everything into your hands, and share the burdens with Cygnus and Regulus. Blacks are a unit, and your unit is getting smaller each year, it seems.” He sighs.

“Yet, we are strong in numbers, even if, for now, your boys are too young to be of any help. You must be ruthless, so they grow old and prosper.”

The old man lectures Sirius on many things, talks so much that Sirius, dazed, thinks it’s impossible he’s sick, or at least *that* sick. Who has the energy and clarity of mind to talk for hours on their death bed- death armchair, as it is.

Tessuth remains by his side at all times, only leaving to bring him-and *only* him- tea and water. She’s attentive, eyes fixed on him, her withered old hand placed gently on his grandfather’s elbow.

He’s really dying. Seeing Tessuth like this- irrefutable proof that his grandfather is dying.

So Sirius leaves in the middle of a speech, goes home, wakes Orion.

“What?” his son grumbles, rubbing his eyes.

“Get dressed. We’re going to see grandfather.”

“Why? At this hour?”

Sirius bends to his level, watches him carefully. “He’s feeling poorly.”

Orion’s eyes widen. “But Blacks don’t feel poorly!”

“He’ll need rest. You might not see him for a while.”

Silence falls. Orion’s face goes from confused to concerned, and then to fear.

“Is he- is he…going away?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius says, gently. “He might.”

He tries to draw his son into a hug, to comfort him, but Orion flees to his dresser and gets dressed in record time.

“What in the-“ Arcturus calls, when Sirius returns with Orion.

Orion runs to him, throws himself in Arcturus’ lap and hugs him tightly.

Sirius wonders when was the last time someone hugged his grandfather.

Was it before his wife died? Was she the last one?

“Orion,” Arcturus says, and he sounds stern, yet-

Yet, there’s a softness to it.

“Father said you’re feeling poorly, that you need rest.”Orion voice comes muffled, face hidden in Arcturus’ neck. “I wanted to see you before you rest.”

Regulus looks away. He swallows, hard.

Sirius' heart breaks. Again.

How is there anything left to hurt? he *thinks*.

"Blacks don't cry," Arcturus states, but that tenderness, that softness is now evident in his voice. And it's alarming, because it has never been there before. He pulls Orion's head back, wipes at his tears. "Death is a natural part of life, the most blessed of journeys, that we all must undertake, eventually. I am ready."

"I am not ready to let you go," Orion says, and the tears keep coming.

Arcturus pats Orion's head.

"I'll never truly die, not as long as you live, and your children will live. I will always be close, as long as you remember me."

"I will remember you!" Orion promises fiercely.

Out of all the children, Orion is closest to Arcturus, because his grandfather invested all his time in Orion, taught him things Sirius didn't want to teach.

"Then you will never lose me. Now, go back to bed, it's too late for you to be up." He scowls at Sirius over Orion's head. "Young men like you need sleep to grow strong. Tessuth, take him back to Grimmauld-"

"Tessuth is not leaving."

His grandfather sighs. "Kreacher!"

"Master Arcturus?" Kreacher shows up, at his side.

"Take the boy to Grimmauld."

"I don't want to leave!" Orion hugs him again.

"Now, now, child. Don't make a scene. Blacks don't make scenes. Calm yourself and go to sleep."

"*Sleep*?" Orion's outrage shines as brightly as his pain.

"Come here." Sirius takes his arm, pulls at it gently. "Kreacher will take you home. *Orion*," he says, when Orion doesn't move.

"Take him to Astrid," Sirius orders Kreacher. "Wake Mother, then get Bellatrix, tell her to stay with Orion."

Bella is always a balm, a way to soothe pain. For Sirius, and for Sirius' sons.

Of course, his sons also have their own mother to do that for them.

“You may leave, too,” his grandfather says, once Orion and Kreacher are gone.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sirius, Regulus and Cygnus say at once.

“I want to die with dignity!”

“Who’s stopping you?” Regulus asks.

“Master needs comfort in his bed,” Tessuth explains. “But Master won’t go to bed with guests here.”

“We’re not guests!”

“No matter,” Arcturus says, waving his hand. “I’m comfortable here, too.”

So they sit on the couch, Sirius, Regulus and Cygnus.

Arcturus remains in his armchair, slouching a bit.

They talk, and, as minutes turn into hours, the old man talks less.

He forgets to mention duty, politics. He looks towards the garden, more and more.

“Melania liked the garden,” he whispers after a long silence. “She used to care for it. She made it beautiful.” A smile flickers on that old face. “And back in Black Manor- she liked to play with Orion and Lu. They’d play all day, did I tell you? I’d come home from work and I’ll find them laughing. They were happy.”

Tessuth keeps giving him teas, and Sirius suspects they are not just teas, because his grandfather seems more and more relaxed after each sip. When he’s incapable to drink on his own, Tessuth holds the cup to his lips.

His words, slurred, each quieter than the last, are all about his wife and children.

And then, eventually, he closes his eyes, and doesn’t open them again.

Regulus stands, turns his back to Sirius and Cygnus, goes to stare out the window.

Tessuth starts singing, in High Elven, that only she speaks on this earth. She sings, and she runs her hand gently over Arcturus’; Sirius imagines she sang this song to dying Blacks for two thousand years.

His grandfather looks comfortable, breathing calmly.

And, eventually, right as the sky threatens to lighten, Sirius feels a pull in his stomach; in his mind he sees a star falling-

Dawn breaks.

“Master is gone,” Tessuth says. “He is with his wife and son.”

(-)

Once Cygnus and Regulus leave to notify the family, Sirius is free to ugly cry, sobs and all. There's no one there to judge him, after all.

He was mistaken.

Tessuth scoffs. "Blacks don't cry," she chides.

"Of, fuck of!" Sirius snarls at her, stands to leave, to go outside, somewhere private-

She grabs his hand with surprising strength. Sirius tries to shake her away, but she won't let go. When he uses magic to dislodge her, it slams into her magic.

He stops, frozen.

"Tessuth is tired," she says, staring up at him. "Tessuth is done. Tessuth was promised she can die with Master -ugh-" she nods at Arcturus. "With this one."

"No," Sirius says, horrified at the thought of having to kill the elf. "No."

"Yes," she insists. "Tessuth is *done*. And Tessuth is free."

It's true. She's free. She used magic to counter his own. She shouldn't have been able to do that.

"Tessuth is owed an honourable death, she is owed assistance, like Tessuth offered assistance and comfort to hundreds of dying Blacks. Tessuth stayed beside them and eased their pain, and now Tessuth is owed this thing in return. Tessuth's head deserves to be on Grimmauld's walls, where she will be honoured for eternity by all Blacks that are yet to come."

He stares at her in horror. "I can't kill you!" He doesn't even want to think about the beheading part.

"Don't be weak!" she snaps at him. "Do you think it was easy for Tessuth to hold the hands of dying Blacks? Of Blacks Tessuth loved? Is you weaker than a house-elf? Tessuth was promised this favour! Tessuth earned it! Tessuth wants to go to the other side, with her dead Blacks! Or, perhaps Tessuth will go to the Elven family, like Tessuth's mother once said, so very long ago. To an eternal green forest where the souls of the great elves rest. Tessuth doesn't know if she will be allowed there, since Tessuth was cursed and twisted into this creature she is now, but wherever Tessuth ends up, it makes no matter. Tessuth needs rest."

Fuck my family, Sirius thinks. Why does this have to fall on him? Why didn't his grandfather kill the blasted elf, if he promised it to her?

Selfish. His grandfather's only selfish act. He took comfort in Tessuth, and he couldn't make himself kill her, so he left it to Sirius, the bastard.

"Elves die in sunlight," she says. "Elves are creature of the sun, not the moon. Elves die in forests. But Tessuth doesn't remember the forest where she was born, where she lived free with her elf kin until Tessuth was captured. Tessuth forgot where it was." Her ears flop, saddened. "Back then, Blacks didn't hesitate to kill all elves and enslave their children. Why does Black now hesitate to kill poor Tessuth when his ancestors did it with vicious conviction?"

"We were at war," Sirius reminds her. "Elves killed us, too. You did me no harm."

She narrows her eyes. "Does Black want Tessuth to do him harm? Will that help?"

He looks at her determined little face; he looks into her old eyes, and she might be just a house-elf, but he recognises that *done* feeling that shines in them.

He felt it, himself.

Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise. A thing to focus on, to delay thinking about losing his grandfather.

"Fine." He agrees, stares down at this ancient being. "Where would you like to- what forest?"

She shakes her head. "Tessuth doesn't remember," she laments.

"How about the one at Black Manor?" he offers, and she perks up.

"Yes! Tessuth likes it there! At the willow beyond the great lake! Where Tessuth buried little Lyra."

"Who?"

"Little Lyra," she says, saddening again. She sighs, shakes her head. "The little star that never got to shine. Such grief it was- oh, how terrible it was! Lyra's father was destroyed. Tessuth found him at the willow, deep into the forest, kneeling with little Lyra in his arms. He was crying, and Blacks don't cry! " She frowns. She looks at his face more carefully, examines Sirius. "That one cried that day, like you is crying now. Tessuth thinks - Tessuth thinks he was your father."

Fuck.

"Oh, I think Tessuth wasn't supposed to say this. I think Master prohibited Tessuth from ever speaking of it," she goes on, but then she shrugs. "But Tessuth is free, so she can say whatever she wants. Yes, take Tessuth there! It was a beautiful place."

"I- I don't know it," Sirius says, chocked.

So she grabs his arm again, and in the next second, they're in the forest, just as the sun starts rising properly.

He's never been this deep into the forest. His father didn't allow it. When they walked and played around the property, he would turn around and say, 'that place is sacred. We're not allowed to trespass'. And Sirius never questioned him, because one doesn't question one's father.

He sees the gravestone, immediately.

Lyra Black

1964

A constellation drawn on it, a crown of flowers placed in front of it.

"Little Lyra!" Tessuth exclaims. "Tessuth told you she is here! Tessuth forgets many things, but littler Lyra was such tragedy, Tessuth never forgot! Master didn't want to let the child go, he held her in his arms, and Tessuth gently coaxed him to hand her over. Tessuth made the grave, lined it with leaves, as old elves did. With leaves and flowers and kindle. Tessuth made a pretty bed for the baby, an earth crib, and then patted master's back as Master made this human honour for his daughter," she points at the gravestone. "He was inconsolable, so Tessuth waited here with him until Master became himself again, never crying again. But Tessuth thinks he never smiled again either, not like he smiled before. Poor Master."

Sirius lived through horrors. He saw his father die, his best friend, his lover; he must now make peace with his grandfather's death.

He must kill this house-elf.

But Sirius never had to bury a child, and he hopes, dearly hopes, that at least he will be spared of that. Whatever hardship he suffered, it pales to what his parents went through, what they had to live with for the rest of their lives.

"Tessuth," he says, softly, and he kneels, faces her. "Thank you. For everything."

Tessuth smile. She nods.

"You are an elf, but you are a Black, too."

She smiles again. "Tessuth is both."

"You honoured your kin, and mine, as well. Look at the trees," he directs her, slowly. "Think of your Elven parents."

"Yes, Master."

"You have no Master," Sirius tells her, and Tessuth twirls around, laughing, and then she stops, raises her head, and closes her eyes. The sun shines brightly on her wrinkled, aged face.

Sirius pulls out his wand.

(-)

Arcturus' death hits Orion the hardest. Sirius sees him struggling with his grief, but there's nothing he can do in the immediate aftermath of Arcturus' death, as the body is brought to Grimmauld, and Sirius stands guard at its head, Regulus and Cygnus beside him.

Orion comes, before the guests that gathered to present their condolences are allowed inside.

He shoves himself between Sirius and Regulus.

He stands there all day, stubborn, trying not to cry.

So many people come, much more than they did for Pollux.

It's a never ending procession, and, at times, Orion leans his weight into Sirius, as the day turns into night.

At some point, Sirius has to force him to leave; even dehydrated and close to fainting, Orion tries to argue, but Astrid takes him away, and he's too tired to properly put up a fight.

Eventually, only Sirius and Regulus are left; they stand in silence, as the night gets darker and darker around them, only a candle lit at their grandfather's feet.

"Did you stay for father?" Sirius whispers.

It is customary for an heir to stand guard for a full day and night when a Head of House dies.

No breaks, no water, no moving.

He remembers his father standing guard for old Sirius, remembers trying to stand with him, but being taken away by his mother.

Arcturus wasn't Head of House, but Sirius is determined to show him the respect as if he had been one.

Because he was, if not in name.

He might not have held the title, but he lead their family for decades, as old Sirius drunk himself to death. He guided his own son for another decade, and then he did so much for Sirius.

"Yes," Regulus whispers back. "Grandfather stood with me," he adds, after some seconds. "And Bellatrix. She didn't move an inch, the entire day and night, even if grandfather told her women don't hold guard."

"I'm sorry."

Regulus doesn't acknowledge the apology.

"Remember that dog you made, in Croatia? That horrible wooden thing? For Dad's birthday?"

It takes Sirius a few seconds, but he remembers a sunny day, spending hours in the forest of a foreign Manor they were visiting, angry with his mother because she refused to take him to the shops in Zagreb to buy his father a birthday gift.

So he decided to make a gift himself, cobbled together some twigs until they resembled a dog.

"I do."

"I found it in one of the boxes in the attic," Regulus whispers. "I put it in Father's coffin before we buried him. I wanted him to have something from you."

Sirius turns his head, but Regulus looks straight ahead, his profile dark in the dim light.

"I left him that ring I got from Aunt Belvina."

"You loved that thing," Sirius says, remembering his brother wearing the blasted thing for years on end.

"I almost didn't put anything in his coffin," Regulus confesses. "I thought, why bother? He wouldn't care, not if he got your shitty dog."

"He loved you, Regulus."

A sigh. "I suppose he did, yes. Anyway, Mum left her gift, and I realised, compared to that, even your dog would be forgotten. He might have loved me, he definitely loved you, but he adored her more than anything in the world."

"What did she give him?"

A tiny smile. "A lock of her hair."

Sirius smiles, too.

When he was young, his mother always wore her hair loose, a cascade of black silk, and his father liked to run his fingers through it, when they were in the privacy of their home.

As Sirius got older, he could tell she was mad at his father, if she came down for breakfast with her hair tied.

Since he died, Sirius only saw her with her hair loose when she almost died. Besides that, she never again wore it free.

(-)

At the funeral, Marvolo sniffles through the service, and Sirius hears Orion telling him that if he doesn't stop crying, *'I'll disown you when I'm Head of House, for shaming us'*.

He reaches behind him and slaps Orion over the head, but then Harry puts himself between Sirius and Orion, and the boys stay silent for the rest of it.

When it's done, Sirius still doesn't have the time to speak to his sons, to comfort them, because he goes with Regulus to Gringotts, to meet their jurist and read his grandfather's will.

His assets are to be divided equally between Sirius and Regulus.

When Pollux died, he left half his fortune divided between Orion, Marvolo and Draco, and the other half to his wife.

By the time they're done directing the goblins where to transfer the gold, and deciding what to do with Arcturus' house, it's already night.

When he goes to check on Orion, he finds Harry and Marvolo sleeping in his bed, on Orion's right. On his left, there is Bella, her fingers gently running up and down Orion's back.

She's the only one awake. "They'll be alright," she whispers. She smiles down at Orion. "He will be fine. I promise."

Bella is always there to pick up the slack. She was there for Regulus, when their father died, comforted him when Sirius was far away, crying his eyes out on Marlene's roof.

She's there for his sons, whenever Sirius is busy.

He doesn't want to be alone, he's sad, and tired, and he still wants to crawl in Voldemort's bed and find comfort there.

After all these years, that's still the first place to come to mind, when Sirius has a hard day.

Sometimes he wonders if it was actually that comforting, or if only became so in Sirius' mind; if his memories are distorted by time.

He goes to Astrid.

She was expecting him; she knows him well, and knows he seeks her when he's sad.

She smiles, and pats the bed, so he climbs in, dressed and all, and places his head on her chest, his hand on her growing belly.

"I'm glad he lived long enough to know we'll have another son," he whispers. "It made him smile."

“He wasn’t much liked,” Astrid says. “But he was loved, and he will be missed. He knew it.”

Sirius nods, and his son moves under his hand.

He falls asleep, eventually.

(-)

“This is the last one!” Astrid says, when she finally finds a comfortable position in bed. “That’s it! I’m done! *Ugh!*” She glares at her stomach. “Why won’t you come out already?”

“Hey, you’re the one that insisted! You wanted a daughter, remember?”

Astrid groans. “I was an idiot. And it’s not even a daughter!”

“He’ll come out,” Sirius consoles her. “Eventually.”

The baby should have come five days before, the Healer said, but apparently the little one is taking his time.

“If I grow any fatter, I’ll start floating!”

“You’re not fat! You’re gorgeous!”

She throws a pillow at him. He wasn’t even lying. Astrid is gorgeous. And this was the first pregnancy Sirius was sane and stable enough to witness, to properly pay attention. He can’t believe he missed it with the first two. All of this made Astrid even more beautiful in his eyes; it makes him see her as a goddess.

“Alright, I’ll let you rest,” Sirius says, retreating to safety, when he can’t improve her mood, no matter what he does.

As it is, Astrid goes into labour mere hours later. Which is unfortunate, because it’s early morning when Kreacher wakes him up to let him know.

Blacks are only born at night, so they’ll have some intense hours ahead of them.

“Let’s Apparate somewhere where it’s night already,” Astrid hisses, when Sirius goes to see her.

She knows Apparition, especially such long distances, is impossible when she’s in labour, so Sirius doesn’t comment on it, just throws compliments at her.

“Why can’t I stay?” he complains, when the women start arriving to tend to Astrid, and they kick him out of the room at noon. “She won’t give birth for at least another eight-nine hours, anyway, why can’t I stay a little longer?”

“Out!” Narcissa pushes him, insistent.

They let the kids see Astrid for a couple of minutes, and then they’re kicked out, too.

“They let Elara stay!” Orion complains. “It’s not fair! I want to stay with Mum! She looks upset and in pain! I want to help her!”

“You can’t help her.” Sirius pats his back. “She’ll be alright.”

“She will be,” Harry offers, having gone through this process before, twice. “And then we’ll have a new brother! I’m so excited!”

Marvolo doesn’t look excited.

(-)

Because it’s the third son, there’s not much fuss about him. Thor doesn’t come, caught with some pressing matters in Norway, and his wife stays with him.

Sirius and Regulus are alone with the children, trying to entertain them, and calm Orion, assuring him Astrid is fine, whenever he gets too anxious.

It’s Elara that brings the good news, though she looks absolutely horrified when she comes running to the living room.

“The baby is here,” she says, eyes wide. “I changed my mind, I don’t want to get married! I don’t want to have babies!”

She climbs in Regulus’ lap. “Daddy, I don’t want to ever get married!”

“How is Astrid?” Sirius asks, standing.

“How do you think?” Elara glares at him. “She had to push a baby out of her-”

“Elara!” Regulus warns.

“Out of what?” Marvolo asks.

“Never you mind. No, wait,” Sirius tells Orion. “I’ll go check on her and call you up shortly, yes?”

“I want to see Mum!”

“Soon,” Sirius assures him.

(-)

Before they left them alone, his mother and Bellatrix swore the baby looks exactly like Sirius looked as a newborn.

Sirius can't tell, has no idea how he looked like back then, obviously. He only recognises then trade mark grey eyes.

They let the children come and see their little brother, as soon as Astrid puts on a clean gown and is resting comfortably.

Orion and Harry hover around Sirius, trying to get the best view of the baby.

Marvolo climbs into bed beside Astrid.

Sirius is fascinated with the tiny human. It's the first time he can actually enjoy it.

With Orion…he wasn't in a good place. With Marvolo, even less.

Now Sirius enjoys it, marvels at the feeling of his little boy, how small he is, a little piece of him, with his own eyes, opened for the first time, taking in the world.

Harry is already an expert, so Sirius trusts him to hold the baby, hands him over carefully, and Harry's face stretches with a wide smile.

"He's so cute!"

"Yeah," Orion agrees, at Harry's shoulder.

Marvolo doesn't look impressed. At all.

"What's his name?" Orion asks.

"I don't know." Sirius ran out of dead people he had a hard time letting go of.

There's James, but he saves that one for Harry, in case Harry ever wants to use it, with his own son one day.

"We can help with the name," Harry suggests. "If you're not sure."

"Yeah," Orion agrees, and he flees to the window, to stare up at the stars. "How about Altair?"

"Hmm. Doesn't sound right," Sirius says,

"Cetus?" Harry suggests. "It's a constellation and also a big sea monster! Sounds nice!"

"I don't like it," Orion argues, neck craned up. "Helix!"

“NO!” Marvolo shouts, and Astrid admonishes him for yelling.

“I like it,” Sirius says, trying it out in his head, reaching out to smooth out the black tuft of hair on the baby’s head, held securely in Harry’s arms.

“No!” Marvolo whisper- yells. “*No!*”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s *Helix*! The first Helix was a a hero in the Elven wars, the other one in the Goblin wars! They’re like legends! It’s enough Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived, and Orion is named after Grandfather, and I don’t even have a Black name! And you want this one to have the best name! It’s not fair! Name him something else, Father!”

“I like Helix,” Orion insists.

“Yeah, I like it, too,” Harry adds.

“Do you like it?” Sirius asks Astrid.

She gives him a look. “Does it matter? You didn’t ask before.”

“Astrid…”

She sighs. “Yes, I like it.”

“Then Helix it is.”

Marvolo storms out of the room.

“Gods, what a crybaby,” Orion laughs, coming closer. “May I hold Helix, Father? I’ll be very careful, I promise.”

Astrid directs him to sit on the bed, beside her, and very carefully instructs Harry in how to hand Helix over to Orion.

(-)

He finds Marvolo in his room, curled up on the bed, with his plush dragon.

Sirius lies down beside him. When he tries to hug him, Marvolo scoots further away.

“I’m not important at all now! You have another spare, with a better name, and I heard Grandma say he looks like you. I look more like Mama, and I don’t have a Black name, and-”

“You’re named after someone very special to me,” Sirius whispers.

“Who? You never told me! And it can’t be more important than Grandfather, anyway. The dead grandfather, I mean,” he clarifies, with all the tact he possesses. “Can’t be, and you gave Orion his name, and he’s also your Heir, and I hate him, and I hate Helix, and I hate *everything*!”

He lets out a scream into his dragon, holding it over his face to muffle the sound.

Sirius takes his dragon, throws it away, then pulls Marvolo into a hug. He resists for a few seconds, but eventually he settles down.

“You know what I hate?” Sirius asks.

“I don’t care!” Marvolo snaps back.

“I hate that stupid ‘heir and spare’ stuff. I really hate it, and I told you a hundred times it doesn’t matter, and to ignore whatever old relics go on about it-”

“Orion says it! And he’s not a relic! He’s awful, but he’s not old!”

“Orion is a prick. Why would you even listen to him?”

Marvolo turns in his arms, stares at Sirius as if he’s stupid. “Because he’s the *heir*!”

“And what does that mean?”

“That he’s the most important!”

Sirius closes his eyes in frustration for a second, but he can’t be too upset, because he has a perfectly healthy new baby that won’t yell at Sirius for at least a couple of years, Astrid is perfectly healthy, too and he’s all warm inside. “It means that, once I’m dead, he will lead the family. That’s all. It doesn’t give him any special rights until then. And by the time I’m dead, you’re both going to be older, and trust me, it will be different. He’ll grow up. He’ll stop being a knob.”

“No, he won’t! You keep saying he’ll get better with time, you’ve been saying that for *ages*, and he’s not!” Marvolo wrestles away from him, and Sirius lets him. He sits, arms crossed, legs crossed, staring at Sirius.

“When I say grow up, I don’t mean next year. I mean, when you’re far older. I promise, he’ll calm down by then.”

“What if you die tomorrow. Or right now? He’ll disown me, like he threatens!”

It’s so much easier calming down Orion. That one just gets in a blind rage, and Sirius only needs to shut him in his bedroom for ten minutes, or slap him over the head, and then he’s all better.

Marvolo, though, he goes into a cold type of rage and he comes up with never ending scenarios and questions, all more dramatic than the other.

“If I die tomorrow, then Regulus will act as Head of House, until Orion is twenty five. That’s old-”

“Ancient!” Marvolo pipes in.

“He’ll be all grown up by then, and he’ll treat you nicely.”

“He’s so mean to me, all the time! I don’t know why!“

“Because you’re a little snitch.”

“I wasn’t when I was smaller! He hated me since forever! Why?”

“I don’t know, why did you just say you hate Helix?”

Marvolo’s eyes widen, then he goes red all over. But he’s determined to stay mad, so he only crosses his arms harder. Sirius worries he’s cutting off circulation.

“Alright, so now that we got the heir and spare out of the way, let’s tackle the others- you both look like me.”

“Everyone says I look like Mama!”

It’s true. Orion looks more like a Black, with only a hint of Astrid, while Marvolo has many of her features, but Sirius’ eyes and nose.

“Well, you’re her son, so you do have some of her features, but have you looked in a mirror?”

“Yes.” Marvolo still answers rhetorical questions.

“Whose eyes are you seeing?”

“Mine.”

“For the love of-” Sirius sits, too. “They’re *mine*! You got them from me, alright? And look at that pout! That’s mine, too. Unfortunately. Gods, poor Mother,” he mutters. Ever since the boys started talking and walking, Sirius understands her more and more. “And I don’t want to hear you say you don’t have a Black name. Your name *is* Black.”

“Yes, but just the last name! I don’t have a star name, like the other Blacks!”

“You’re unique!” Sirius grabs him again, pulls at him. Marvolo resists. “I knew it since I held you the first time. I knew you’d be my favourite son. So I gave you a unique name. Just for you. I had to honour father, with my first born, it’s just how things are done, you know? I didn’t have a choice.”

“Oh.” Marvolo’s limbs loosen up a little.

“But I wanted you to have a perfect name, completely different from any other Black. Because you’re so special, yes?”

Finally, Marvolo gives in, and allows Sirius to hug him, properly.

“You always say I’m your favourite, but you act like Harry is your favourite-”

“It’s because his parents are dead, and he’s not even a Black, so I have to make an extra effort.”

“And after Harry, you act like Orion is your favourite-”

“Oh, come on! I yell at him all day long! How many times did I punish him, and how many times did I punish you? Huh? See, you’re my favourite.”

Marvolo shifts a little, settles better into Sirius’ lap. “You punish him more, because he misbehaves, and I don’t. And when you punish me, most of the time I didn’t even do anything, I am just around Orion when he does something bad, but you don’t even care.”

Oh, for the love of-

“Marvolo! You’re my favourite. Really. You are. I promise.”

“I better be! Orion’s everyone’s favourite, so I better be yours. Even Mother, when I ask her, she says she loves us all the same! How lame!”

“She’s lying. She’s a mother, she has to say those things. But, secretly, she also likes you the best.”

“You think?”

“I’m sure.” Sirius kisses the top of her head. “Everyone has a favourite, right? She does too, she just can’t say it, but it’s you.”

Marvolo nods. “That’s true. I also have a favourite. I love you, Father, but I love Mama a bit more. I hope you understand. She’s just much nicer.”

Sirius can’t help it. He bursts out laughing, and he hugs Marvolo tighter.

These sons of his…no matter how much trouble, they’re worth every headache.

“I understand. Anyway, Astrid will have to pay a lot of attention to Helix. You saw how tiny he is, yes? He’s not big and strong like you. He needs her a lot. So you have to be ready for that, but, in a year or so, that will be done with, and she’ll go back to paying you the most attention.”

“I… I didn’t really see how tiny Helix is,” Marvolo says, no more anger in his voice. “I was too upset to look properly. Do you think maybe…I can have another look?”

“Of course. But tomorrow. Now, they’re sleeping. As we should.”

“How did Helix come out of Mother? Because I asked Harry and Orion, but what they said didn’t make much sense to me. That can’t be possible.”

Those little demons. “They use a special spell to Apparate the baby out of her belly.”

“Oh. That makes much more sense,” Marvolo nods. “Yes. I should have known Orion and Harry are just messing with me.”

Sirius lies back, taking Marvolo with him. It is quite late.

“Maybe, tomorrow, I can even hold him. What do you think?”

“That will be great. You’ll be a good older brother, won’t you? Show Orion how it’s done, maybe he learns something.”

“That’s a good idea,” Marvolo says with a yawn. “I’ll show Orion how it’s done! I’ll be a better older brother than he is!”

“I always have the best ideas.”

“You do, Father.”

“Why don’t you go to sleep? You must be tired.” He at least tired Sirius, that’s for sure.

“Will you stay with me?”

“I’ll be right here,” Sirius promises.

(-)

Cygnus’ death is a consequence of Arcturus’ and Pollux’ deaths.

He is murdered in France.

The authorities there claim they are having trouble determining who did it. Sirius doesn’t press the issue, though when he goes to retrieve Cygnus’ body, he finds many Head of Departments, even the Minister, ready to placate him.

He knows who did it; Pollux lived for two decades in Paris, knew their enemies there, and both the Lestrange and the Rosier French branches are ready to point Sirius in the right direction.

Sirius doesn’t want the culprits imprisoned- it would be hard to accomplish, either way, what with Caelus being a Roux, an old and noble French family, with connections everywhere in the French Ministry.

No, Sirius doesn’t want *legal* justice.

Bella says nothing, falls silent since they hear the news; when Cygnus’ body is brought home, she only has eyes for him. She cries, softly, noiseless, so quiet.

Andromeda doesn't cry, but holds a devastated Dora close in her arms.

Narcissa keeps herself busy, Lucius trailing behind her as she screams at elves.

Druella looks more awake than Sirius has ever seen her. She, like Bellatrix, and Grandmother Irma, doesn't leave Cygnus' side, until he's lowered into the ground.

It's only there, in the graveyard, once earth covers the coffin, that Bella lifts her eyes. She looks straight into Sirius'.

He nods.

(-)

"Don't," Sirius' mother says, that night, as he packs.

He doesn't answer, keeps packing, because this can't be left to Kreacher. He needs potions that can potentially explode if they're too close to each other, he needs cursed artefacts, far above Kreacher's knowledge in handling them.

"If you start a family feud, where will it end? Your children-"

"If I don't answer this, we're as good as dead. It will show others they can cut down Blacks with no consequences. I'm not starting a family feud, Mother. I will end it."

Sirius knows Cygnus most likely had his share of fault in this; or maybe Pollux. Perhaps even Grandmother Irma, as entitled and vicious as any Black, always stepping on everyone's toes. Someone from his family did something to the Roux family, either recently or far into the past- it makes no matter who started it, or why.

The 'who' and 'why' often get lost in the ensuing bloodshed. Sirius' family doesn't even know who placed a blood curse on them, centuries ago, or why.

These things need to be crushed as soon as possible.

"You are untested," his grandfather warned.

But, oh, how they are testing Sirius.

"And if you die?" She puts a hand on his elbow. It's trembling.

He shakes it off. "I won't."

"I lost my husband, my father, and now both of my brothers. I cannot-"

"I can't let this go unanswered, and you know it. You speak as a mother, but you are now one of the oldest living Blacks. You know I can't let this go unanswered."

It's terrible to think of it; all day, it kept popping into Sirius' mind.

He's the oldest Black man left. He's thirty, and he's the oldest living Black man.

And they think him weak because of it; they think his family is weak without Arcturus and Pollux behind him.

He reminds himself he might have lost almost all the men, but he has the women.

Later that night, he sits at the kitchen table, with Regulus, Irma, and his mother, with Druella, Narcissa, Andromeda and even young Dora.

"She's too young," Andromeda said.

"She's seventeen," Sirius countered.

She's in her break from Hogwarts, a student, a child, despite what he claimed, but she is his blood, even if she alone at that table doesn't have his name. And she is *willing*. Proud, loyal Hufflepuff that she is.

No other Black in history has gone to Hufflepuff. *Ever*. There had been plenty of Ravenclaws, a dozen or so Gryffindors, obviously a Slytherin majority, but never a Hufflepuff.

Even daring Sirius wouldn't have imagined getting sorted there to annoy his mother, because in his family, the badgers are mocked beyond belief. His father would have had something to say about it, as opposed to not caring about Gryffindor.

When Dora sent her letter home, Cygnus took one look at it, a muscle jumped in his jaw, and Andromeda said she tensed, because she was waiting for the worst.

"Well, now we can say Blacks have been sorted into every House," was all he said, and he sent Dora a gorgeous black winter robe, with yellow accents.

"Where is Bellatrix?" his mother asks.

"Busy," Sirius answers. "Now, here is what we are going to do."

Nymphadora will take Bella's form, go around visiting Manors with Narcissa, Andromeda and Lucius, for however long Bella and Sirius will be in France.

Sirius hopes they will be done by the time Dora has to go back to Hogwarts. In case they aren't done, Andromeda will drink Polyjuice and parade around as Bella. After all, Andromeda's absence will be questioned the least, and no one would suspect her of violence. But still, it's preferable she's seen in public as well.

Sirius' mother is to Polyjuice as him; from everyone in the world, if someone can impersonate him accurately, it's her. She'll walk around in public, even attend a Wizengamot meeting. Regulus will often be at her side.

“Bella and I need to be seen often,” Sirius reminds them. “Daily, if possible.”

Regulus is the most resistant to the plan, simply because he wants to come with Sirius. But he knows, without Sirius having to remind him, that in case things go south in France, then Regulus will be the last adult Black man. He has to stay safe.

Sirius hands his wand to his mother. “Use it often,” he says.

Druella has her own wand back, for the first time in years. Bella took Cygnus’, before they sealed the coffin.

They will leave no proof, nothing concrete to tie it back to them. Sirius cannot use his wand, doesn’t risk buying a new one that can be traced back to him.

Sirius tells the children he and Bella will be going away to Black Manor, for a little while, because Bella is very upset about Cygnus, and he needs to cheer her up.

“But Mother will pretend she’s me, and Dora will pretend she’s Bella,” he says, because if anyone else can be fooled, his sons would immediately catch on to it.

Harry caught on that Sirius was possessed when he was three years old, after all.

“Why?”

“I’m an important man, I need to be seen around, and you know Bella has some problems with the Aurors, because of the war. She’s not supposed to disappear for days on end.”

“Oh. When will you be back?”

“It won’t take long,” he assures them, and he hopes he’s not lying.

He kisses them all, and sends them to bed.

However, later, after he writes his will, seals it with the family ring-

He stares at it, for long minutes. And then he heads to Orion’s room.

He finds him still awake. And upset.

“They all died within a year,” Orion whispered, at the funeral, and he hugged Marvolo closer to him.

Sirius sits on the edge of the bed, taking Orion in. “You have to be nice while I’m away,” he says.

He nods. “I will be.”

“With Marvolo, too.”

Orion frowns. “I wouldn’t be mean to him now! Not when he’s so upset!”

“Good. And don’t upset Mother, either.”

“I won’t! I promise!”

Sirius remembers his last conversation with his father, imprinted in his memory. He hopes Orion won’t have to relive this moment, over and over, for the rest of his life.

Sirius pulls off his ring, gives it to his son.

“Why don’t you keep this safe for me?”

Orion looks up, and he’s afraid. He knows a Head of House never takes his ring off.

You have to do this. For him. For the family, he reminds himself, when all he wants is to crawl in bed with Orion, cheer him up, reassure him.

“Daddy-“

“Just for a few days,” Sirius says, and he bends to hug Orion.

“Where are you really going?” Orion holds on to him, tightly. “Daddy-”

“Don’t you worry about that. Just be good for your mother, take care of your brothers.”

(-)

For the first time in years, he makes his way to the heart of the house.

Last he was there, he entered with his eyes closed, to power the blood wards.

This time, he doesn’t close his eyes.

Voldemort looks as he did when Sirius found him in Godric’s Hollow.

He looks asleep.

Sirius stands above him, motionless, minutes on end.

“If someone close to the Blacks had threatened your family, if someone had almost killed members of your family, what would Orion have done to that person? A person he trusted but stabbed him in the back?”

Sirius doesn’t want to think about it.

“What would Arcturus do? Or old Sirius I hear so much about? Do you know how much blood was on his hands? Do you realise why your family has the reputation it does? You think it came with them acting nice?

Sirius knew he was right, back when Voldemort said those words. He tried not thinking about it, but he knew.

He plucks Voldemort's wand from where it rests, on his chest, between his fingers, the way Sirius arranged it.

It comes awake in his grasp, powerful, shaped by dark magic Sirius hasn't practiced in so many years.

It's wilful. Phoenix cores are so stubborn, so loyal to their master.

Sirius has to go; they're on a tight schedule. Everything has to be on time, perfect, he cannot miss the illegal Porteky Lucius procured for them.

He cannot delay.

He wills his feet to move.

Instead, it is his free hand that moves, touches Voldemort's face, pale, hard and cold as marble. He runs his thumb over his brow.

Since Cygnus died, Sirius only allowed himself to feel fury, controlled, but sustained. Determination.

But when he touches Voldemort, different feelings threaten to overwhelm him.

Voldemort's fingers move from Sirius' cheek, over his lips. They rest there, briefly, before he takes his hand away, kisses Sirius lightly. After that he extricates himself from the embrace, stands to his full height.

All traces of the gentleness he just displayed, that he always displays when alone with Sirius, melt away.

He will do awful, awful things when he gets to the Hall, it occurs to Sirius.

He looks ready and capable of committing unnamable acts of violence; his face resumes its usual harshness, his eyes burn with fury, and he appears to be nine feet tall, from Sirius' point of view, laid on the couch as he is, looking up.

Not an hour before, he was a god, a benevolent god that answered Sirius' prayers, and came to rescue him and Bella and the others.

He looks like a god now, too, but there will be no saving whoever betrayed them. No, there will only be wrath, there.

"No one preys on me," he answers. "Every sentient creature on this earth knows better than to try.

Sirius bends and kisses his cold lips. He allows himself a moment, eyes closed, holding his breath, fingers tightening over that sharp jaw.

And then he straightens, turns, and leaves.

(-)

Kreacher is determined, too, face hardened. There's fury in his eyes, as well.

"For Master Cygnus," Kreacher tells himself, and then he starts drinking.

Sirius told him this will help him avenge Cygnus, and Kreacher assured him it will be an honour to be of service.

So he drinks the potion Voldemort used to protect Salazar's locket.

A terrible fucking potion. Sirius fights against the pity he feels, makes Kreacher drink it all.

"It will be over soon; you'll go back to Grimmauld and Mother will care for you," he tells Kreacher, over and over, until the potion is gone.

It actually helps that Kreacher's agonised cries are all about dead Blacks he misses.

It reminds Sirius of his purpose, of their legacy.

Finally, he can take the locket.

He puts it around his neck.

While Sirius is not unfamiliar with Voldemort's wand, while there is a match, it is not his wand. And one doesn't fuck around with a Phoenix core, especially since he doesn't have the time to subdue it.

He thought it prudent to carry a piece of the master's soul with him. He judged correctly. He feels the wand's acceptance as soon as the locket is around his neck.

"Take me to Denver, and then go home," he orders a weeping, shivering Kreacher.

Who obeys. Kreacher never disobeyed when it mattered most.

He drops Sirius on the beach, he even manages to wish him good luck, and then he disappears.

Bella waits for him on the shore, her hair billowing around her, as she turns her back to the ocean, to face Sirius.

She eyes the Horcrux, a bit apprehensive.

"It's fine. It takes a long time to give it power to act," he says, as she pulls out the Portkey from her bag.

“I know. I’m more worried we’ll die there and lose the Horcrux.”

It startles a laugh out of Sirius. It’s not really funny, but-

He laughs, and she smiles, too.

“I wouldn’t lose his wand or his soul,” Sirius says, as they wait for the Portkey to activate. “I know at least one of us will survive this, if only because I would never lose what he most treasured.”

She nods, steps closer, her fingers curling around his own.

(-)

The Roux Manor is hidden under the Fidelius. They did take precautions. After all, they might underestimate Sirius, think him too young to manage this, but they still took precautions.

“They will test you,” his grandfather warned him.

No one will test me after this, Sirius thinks.

The others look at the Blacks, now with only Sirius and Regulus, and they think them crippled. Because they fail to understand that while his family lost so many men, they have Bella, fiercer and better at magic than a thousand men.

People feared Arcturus, held back on whatever revenge plans they had, but they should have feared Bella.

She’s far more lethal than Arcturus.

“What now?” she asks, when they stare at the empty plot where Rosier told them the Roux Manor is, but they can’t see it.

“Give me a moment.”

Sirius breathes in, and throws himself into the stars. As before, they try to pull him to where Voldemort is, but Sirius wants revenge so badly, knows he must deliver it, that he manages to control the projection, focuses it on his own location, until he sees himself and Bella.

And the Manor.

The Fidelius doesn’t hide one from the starts, after all.

“Morgana’s tits,” Bella whispers, and Sirius blinks, and he’s back in his body.

The Manor is there, too, visible in all its glory, the Fidelius charm shattered.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” she answers, twirling Cygnus’ wand.

(-)

“Daddy!” Orion comes running down the stairs, jumps in his arms.

Sirius had only gotten back, was taking a few moments to himself, leaning against the umbrella stand, trying to breathe.

It’s late at night, so late it’s almost morning.

Orion hugs him tightly.

Sirius hugs back, buries his head in that soft hair, that smells of innocence, nothing like the smoke, fire and death Sirius left behind.

“Why are you up?”

“I was sleeping, but I felt something. I just knew you’re back!”

The house. In Sirius’ absence, Grimmauld listens to Orion. And Orion must have deeply wished to know when Sirius comes back.

Sirius hugs him for a little longer, even if his right arm hurts like all the hells, and he has a burn on his chest that neither he, nor Bella, managed to heal properly.

But he doesn’t care. Holding Orion is worth it. He needs it.

“I kept it safe for you,” Orion whispers in his ear, and he draws back, legs wrapped around Sirius’ waist, one arm around his neck, but the other goes under his sleeping shirt, and pulls out a silver chain, on which he put the ring. “I bathed with it, I slept with it, I never parted with it! I kept it safe, Father.”

Sirius smiles. “I knew you would. You did good.”

Orion pulls at the chain, harshly, breaking it. It falls on the carpet, like a silver snake. Orion takes Sirius’ right hand, and slips the ring on his finger.

It fits; Sirius no longer feels it’s too big for him. It’s a part of him, has been for years.

It’s still heavy, though. Getting heavier by the day.

Sirius caries him to the kitchen, puts Orion on the counter. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

He goes to the heart of the house, but it’s worse than before.

Sirius is exhausted, he's unstable, all the atrocities he committed- he shakes his head, pulls out the white wand, cleans it of blood, and places it back on Voldemort's chest.

He pulls off the locket, too. He feels a pang of regret.

It's only been thirteen days, but they were *rough*, long, with little sleep, high emotions, dark magic- it fed the locket, fast, and already Sirius could feel it awakening.

He puts it around Voldemort's neck and flees back to the kitchen.

"Let's get you to bed." Sirius picks Orion up again. It's been some time since he carried Orion around, but he *needs* it.

"Father, were you in France?"

Sirius controls his reactions. "No, I was in Ireland. Why?"

"Awful tings happened in France," Orion whispers, head on Sirius' shoulder. "It was in the papers, every day. Grandma looked horrified. She cried. She tried to keep the papers from me, but I looked through the bin. Someone killed people there. An entire noble family. I thought maybe you went to France to help them, because you always help whoever you can. Did we know the Roux family? Was Grandma friends with them? Is that why she looked so upset?"

"We didn't know them well," Sirius says. "We've only…crossed paths a few times."

"Oh. We should still send flowers, no? It's only polite."

Sirius kisses the top of his head. "There's no one left to send flowers to."

As he puts Orion to bed, he reminds himself this is for him. That what he had to do is justified, that he needed to show the world Sirius Back is not to be trifled with.

It's worth it. It will protect all my boys.

Sirius repeats it, like a mantra, when he gets into his bathtub, trying to wash the last two weeks away.

There's only a little blood, from his festering burn; they changed robes often, all dirty with mud, tears, blood, brain matter-

Before they left for France, a part of him wondered if he still has it; if Bella is still capable.

After all these years of peace, a part of him feared they lost their duelling skills, their quickness with a wand.

"You don't lose something like that," Bellatrix assured him. *"It's a part of you no one can cut off. The body, the mind- we'll always remember our training, fall back on it, as instinctive as breathing."*

"You didn't have proper training," Sirius teased her.

When they were young, Sirius was trained on how to duel. She was trained in how to look after a manor.

Bella laughed, eyes crinkling at the corners. It's only when she laughs that a couple of very fine lines make an appearance. She's young, and gorgeous, the most beautiful woman to walk the earth, yet lately, when Sirius looks at her, he's strongly reminded of another woman, the only one to have ever rivalled such beauty.

A woman from his childhood, face unlined, save for when she laughed. And oh, it was rare, but when it happened, the world stopped, held its breath, turned to her.

When she laughed, Sirius' father' icy veneer cracked, looked at his wife as if she was the only being in the world, as if he was a dying tree, seeking sunlight.

"I was trained," Bella says, laughter settling into a smile; fond, and sad and wistful. "The greatest wizard to have ever lived trained me for years." She cups his cheek, her fingers warm on his face. "He trained you, too. If he were here, he'd turn our enemies into dust. We were his favourite students- I think, between us, we can manage. No- I don't think. I know. Just imagine that he's watching us when we fight."

Sirius fought as if Voldemort was watching him, as if he was whispering the darkest, most terrible spells in his ear.

Sirius thought of him opening up the earth to swallow Aurors; he thought of Voldemort cutting down dozens in Diagon Alley, blood spraying everywhere.

As he was drenched in blood, as he committed unspeakable acts, he only allowed himself to think that it would make Voldemort smile.

He remembered how Voldemort looked at him in Norway, when Sirius mauled a man's throat to death.

As he and Bella chased their last remaining enemy through dense woods, after days of hunting, heading to Belgium, where they wouldn't be able to cross without leaving a trace -

"He's getting away!" Bella screamed. Injured, bloodied, tired, in boots that had a bit of heel to them, but running faster than Sirius.

Voldemort wouldn't let him get away, Sirius thought.

I can't fail, Sirius thought. Not when he's so, so close. Not with what is at stake.

So Sirius ran, looked up, and then he was rushing through the wind, through the clouds, heart filled with vengeance, murder on his mind.

He fell, the earth wet and cold and hard beneath him; he coughed up blood and Bella turned, rushed back to him.

But, miles away, already in Belgium, their target fell as well, struck by lighting.

The legends from the Elven wars say his ancestors could kill their foes from miles away, without a wand, without moving a finger.

"Wizards commanded armies of men against the Elven kin, but it is said Blacks commanded the stars, bent them to their will, striking down Elven leaders hiding in their mighty forests. It is said Blacks could rule the night-sky, summon storms that would sweep the earth, that tides would rise under their command, flooding everything in their path. Of course, we must look at these tales with a critical eye; the truth long lost to history."

He remembers rumours from his childhood, people whispering that old Sirius' enemies turned out dead, no matter how far they fled, how well they hid. *"Pay them no mind,"* Sirius' father said, when he was old enough to ask, when he still remembered his great grandfather as an odd man, that spent all his nights in the garden, all his days sleeping and drinking. He couldn't believe people were saying such things about that old frail man, that was so thin by the time he died, he was more ghost than man. *"Let them talk. It's all they can do. They like to talk about us, because it is the only way they can touch greatness in their insignificant lives, by mentioning our name."*

But Sirius also remembered that old man whispering to him, long, skeletal fingers tight around Sirius' waist.

"When night falls, great men cower under their stone roofs, with bared windows, terrified of starlight," his great-grandfather hissed, pleased, as he held Sirius in his lap, in the garden. *"They cower from me, boy. Because they know, when the sun goes down, I am the God of the night. And when I'm dead, you'll be the God. They'll cower from you, soon enough, my little moon-child. Marry Bellatrix, the Warrior, make more moon children. It's too lonely otherwise."*

"He's dead," Sirius gasped, as Bella turned him on his side, as he threw up blood, black as the night. "He's dead. I got him."

He looked up, and he saw awe in her eyes; he saw the stars in her eyes, too. Hers were always darker than the rest of his family, but the stars shone as brightly there as they did in the rest of his kin.

He always wanted her, always loved her, but in that moment he was grateful no one let them marry. He wouldn't want to pass this on to his children.

And he won't. As he watches Orion sleep, returning to his bedside, drawn to him, to someone innocent and bright and good, Sirius is glad he didn't pass over this gift to him.

He spared his son of it, but-

There, in the dark, he allows himself to cry.

It's always hardest, with Orion. All his sons bring him joy, so much joy, but sometimes Sirius looks at Orion and his heart breaks, because he knows this child, carefree, wilful, loud and

generally happy will one day become-

What Sirius became.

One day, Orion will have to make horrible choices that will plague his dreams; one day, he'll be the one that will have to kill people and then put his own son to sleep.

He'll be so lonely, this boy of his that loves company, that has never known loneliness in his life, surrounded by love since he was born. But, one day, even if surrounded by people, Orion will be so terribly, unfathomably alone, bearing the burden of a two thousand old legacy on his shoulders.

And it's Sirius that will do that to him, hand him this mantle. It's Sirius that has to turn this innocent, cheerful boy into the next Black Head of House.

He knows his father felt it, too. He knows now, that his father once looked at Sirius and thought the same things. He understands now why his father always favoured Sirius, always gave so much more of his time to Sirius, even if he loved Regulus, too. Why he allowed Sirius to sometimes misbehave, get away with things Regulus wasn't allowed to get away with.

Because he knew what lay in front of Sirius, what burden he'll pass onto Sirius.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, softly, gently running his fingers through Orion's hair. "I'm so sorry."

Now that Arcturus is dead, it will be Sirius that has to make sure Orion is ready for what is coming.

"And what are you turning Sirius into?" his mother once screamed at his father, when his father complained she turned Regulus weak.

Sirius knows that even if he'll have to be tougher and tougher with Orion, their relationship won't suffer. He knows, because he loved his own father, no matter how tough he got, how he punished Sirius, taught him hard, frustrating lessons. Sirius always adored him, and now his son will adore him, too, no matter what Sirius will put him through.

He's so tempted, sometimes, to emulate Lucius. He wants it so badly.

Lucius wants to try a different way, wants to prove that one can raise an Heir in a gentler manner, softer; he thinks Draco can become a hard man with time, slowly, *later*.

But Sirius doesn't believe it; even if it were possible- what if Sirius dies, like his father, when Orion is too young? What would happen then, leaving a soft boy to bear a burden Sirius fled from at sixteen; and Sirius was not soft; he was not raised gently, and he still fled from the enormity in front of him.

No, he can't risk it.

He cries, silently, alone, the way he teaches his sons to do it; never look weak, never break in front of others. Don't cry in general.

But that night, he cries, because from all the many crimes he is guilty of, the worst will be turning Orion into the type of man that will one day be willing and ready to commit the same crimes Sirius committed.

He can't imagine being anyone else, now; he can't think what would have become of him if he never returned home. Maybe he'd have been happier, but he doubts it. He'd have never been happy without his family. He'd have never learned how to live without his incredible wealth and status.

Sirius always enjoyed his privileges, and he enjoys them now. But sometimes he wonders if the price is too high.

Sometimes he wonders if Orion will find the price too high.

Perhaps if Sirius never ran away, never lived freely, he'd find all this easier to bear.

But he tasted freedom; he tasted finding himself, living the way he wanted; oh, it was miserable half of the time, uncertain, frustrating, but he did feel free in a way he hadn't felt since he returned home.

You were happy with Voldemort, the thought comes. *Free, and happy.*

With Voldemort, Sirius missed nothing. With Voldemort, Sirius felt the safety his family used to provide, he felt the power surrounding Voldemort was just as great as his family's, even greater. Sirius had all that, but he was also free.

But then he shattered Sirius, in a way his family never did.

No. His father, his grandfather, they were always right. No one can be trusted, if their name isn't Black, if their blood isn't Black.

It might be stifling, and lonely, but the safest path for a Black is staying close to family.

And he wants his sons safe, above all else. Even above their freedom.

(-)

Scrimgeour and his French counterpart look at Sirius carefully, as they hand him a stack of photographs.

The Black coat of arms is drawn in blood over a wall, in some; in others, it's carved into a man's chest.

The only piece of Caelus they'll ever find. Bella turned the rest of him to ashes.

"I've no idea how that could have happened," Sirius says, barely glancing at the photographs.

He's reliving those moments in his dreams, no reason to add to it.

"I had nothing to do with it. Why would I wish harm upon them?"

The French Auror glowers at him. But since they never 'caught' the ones who killed Cygnus, since the French Ministry covered for the Roux family, there's nothing official to tie the the Rouxes to Cygnus' murderer, or with Sirius' answering rampage.

"I was here, in Britain, anyway. At the time of the murders. I went out with my brother and my wife almost everyday. Surely, you can find many witnesses to attest to that."

"Your coat of arms is at seven separate murder scenes," the Frenchman says. *Just seven? They mustn't have found them all, then.* "Surely, it is no coincidence."

Sirius meets his gaze, doesn't answer.

"We would like you to come to Paris for an official interview."

"No," Sirius says, softly.

"He is a member of the Wizengamot," Scrimgeour says, standing. "You have no authority here, unless you come with a warrant from the International Federation."

The Frenchman storms out, after a heated exchange with Scrimgeour, that lasts about twenty minutes.

Sirius stays silent, for all of it.

When they're alone, Scrimgeour looks at Sirius with disgust.

And fear. There's fear there.

"He won't come with a international warrant, will he?"

"No," Sirius says. "I've done nothing wrong."

Scrimgeour doesn't believe him. No one will believe him. Which is what he wanted. He wants people to know, for the rumours to spread, far and wide.

"There's no proof," Sirius adds. "You can review my wand, if you want, I know you already asked around about Bella, and you found out she was here, as she should be, as per the conditions of her release. She never left the country. And, not that it matters, but I am married to the granddaughter of the Russian Emperor. He's quite…influential in the Federation. They won't allow the French to to sniff around Britain. "

As soon as they heard about what happened to Cygnus, Thor sent a letter. “We are ready to support you, in this time of need,” it said.

‘Support’ was underlined. But Sirius didn’t want to involve Thor, decided he wants to handle it on his own. Let no one say the Blacks need help.

He received a similar letter from Astrid’s uncle, the Crown Prince. “We stand together,” he signed the condolence letter.

Everyone looks with fear at Sirius, after he returns from France. Even Lucius, for a short while.

Sirius wishes he’d be like Bella, who smiles brightly, who feels better than ever, truly like her old self.

“I sleep like a baby,” she told Sirius, when Sirius asked her about it.

Because he’s struggling to sleep.

He even wishes for his regular nightmares back, for James and Voldemort.

“It will pass,” she kisses his cheek, pats his shoulder. “You always had a softer heart, but that’s done now. We did what we had to. For Father. For our family. No one trespasses against us. It was justice.”

Justice is a a frightening thing in Sirius’ world.

But, with time, Bellatrix is proven right. Sirius might have once had a ‘soft heart’ but that’s gone.

He lost that softness, after James, after Voldemort, after Azkaban.

And whatever remains of it, died in France, along with the Roux family.

Sirius recovers fast from it, the nightmares going away within months, the screams in his ears dimming down.

Time truly heals everything.

Everything but Voldemort’s loss. Somehow, that still remains the only wound Sirius can’t close.

Bella and Sirius won in France, because of Voldemort. They killed fourteen people, hunted them down like animals when they started fleeing, after Caelus died; old family, powerful in their own rights, but Bella and Sirius were trained by Voldemort.

He kept telling Sirius, before he died, that his magic was still blossoming, that Sirius will get stronger with each year, as he matures.

Sirius is all grown up.

He sees it now, truly understand how young he'd been, how weak; now, that Sirius's brain and magic fully developed, now that he's surrounded by his own might, Sirius understands how defenceless he's been at nineteen, at twenty, at twenty one.

He becomes so aware of it when a girl tries flirting with him, a twenty year old girl, and Sirius perceives her as a child, has no interest in her.

He realises how emotionally stunted Voldemort had been, to have preferred Sirius' company, instead of someone's older.

"He preyed on you," his grandfather once said, referring to Voldemort choosing young men for his army, but the subtext was that Voldemort preyed on Sirius, specifically.

"Should I remind you how young some of Father's women were?" Sirius challenged, so very defensive over Voldemort, even after everything; his grandfather got all offended, didn't speak to Sirius for weeks.

(-)

"How curious." Ollivander looks at Harry, who finally found a wand after rejecting so many Sirius was staring to get worried.

"What's curious?" Sirius and Harry ask simultaneously.

"The wand is made of holly, with a phoenix feather."

Sirius' blood pressure skyrockets.

"Wicked!" Harry says, excited. "That's a rare core, right?"

"Yes. Not only is it rare, but that particular phoenix only ever gave two feathers. And the other feather went into the wand that gave you that scar."

Lucius' left eyebrow raises high on his forehead. They look at each other, as Draco and Harry brag about their new wands.

The Horcrux, Sirius thinks. *The phoenix feather sensed the Horcrux.*

"Father, I want a wand, too! It's not fair! I want a wand!" Orion complains, watching Harry and Draco with jealousy.

Sirius is so distracted and concerned, he gives in and lets him get one; Ollivander tries to make some noise about Orion being too young, but Sirius glares at him until he complies and starts measuring Orion's wand hand.

(-)

“There’s been a break-in at Gringotts,” Lucius tells him, the next day.

That’s awful news at *any* time, but especially after Harry’s wand, Sirius gets a really bad feeling about it.

“What vault?” he asks, strangled.

Voldemort’s Horcrux is in Bella’s-

“An empty one. It was emptied just hours before the break-in. I bribed some people until I found out it was Hagrid that cleared it.”

Sirius blinks at him. “Hagrid has a vault?”

Lucius scoffs. “No. I can’t find out who owned it; my sources don’t now. But it was high security. Deep underground. The goblins are pissed.”

“Who would even have the skill to break into Gringotts?” Sirius asks.

Lucius twitches. Sightly, a tiny muscle at the corner of his eye.

They both know of only one wizard with enough power and intellect to accomplish such a thing.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Within hours, Lucius starts saying he wants to send Draco to Durmstrang.

“It’s safer there,” he begs Narcissa, but she won’t relent, appalled at Lucius’ audacity to suggest sending Draco so far away.

Of course, Narcissa doesn’t know Voldemort isn’t dead. She doesn’t understand Lucius’ paranoia.

It’s just paranoia, Sirius tells himself.

It’s absurd to think Voldemort somehow crawled back after so many years and went to Gringotts, of all places. And not for his Horcrux. What would he want with Gringotts?

Sirius’ nerves are just frayed after the wand debacle.

“Dumbledore is at Hogwarts,” he tells Lucius. “Hogwarts is safe, Lucius, stop fretting.”

“Dumbledore?” Lucius hisses. “Have you lost your mind? He doesn’t give a shit about Slytherins. You almost got a Slytherin killed, remember? Right under his nose. And he just brushed it off.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Well, there you go. Your dear friend Snape is at Hogwarts, he can look after Draco.”

He did question Dumbledore’s sanity when he heard, many, many years ago, that Dumbledore hired Snape.

Though, really- Snape is the only man who heard the blasted prophecy, besides the Headmaster. It makes sense Dumbledore wants to keep him close.

(-)

I could check, Sirius thinks, up on the roof.

He really doesn’t want to. It’s why he stopped using astral magic, besides the French exception. An emergency, as it was.

He really doesn’t want to see Voldemort, what shape he’s in. He’s afraid Voldemort will *sense* him, too, like he always did when Sirius projected to him.

I will check. If anything odd happens again, one single thing, I will check.

He really doesn’t have to jump to conclusions after a break-in. If Hagrid was involved, most likely it was something to do with Dumbledore, since Hagrid is his errand boy.

And Dumbledore is an eccentric man, with plenty of enemies.

Besides, who would bring Voldemort back? He needs a body, and the body is in Sirius’ home.

There’s another ritual Voldemort taught him, as a last resort, in case Voldemort’s original body was not available, or too destroyed to function, depending on how he was killed.

But that one is so convoluted, so over the top complicated. They’d need to create a golem of sorts, to sustain Voldemort, then they’d need a loyal’s follower flesh, willingly given, the blood of an enemy, forcibly taken, and the bones of one of Voldemort’s ancestors.

Just creating the golem would require skill not many possess. Voldemort’s most competent and loyal are in Azkaban; certainly, from all those that denounce him to escape Azkaban, no one would willingly sacrifice a limb to resurrect him. Only Bella, but Bella has all her limbs in place, and Sirius is sure this time she wouldn’t betray him. She stayed put, all these years, stood by Sirius. And there’s Barty, but Sirius went to see him as soon as the break-in happened.

No, Sirius can’t think who else would be willing and competent enough to go through all that bother to find and resurrect Voldemort.

Besides, if Voldemort was truly back in power, the Dark Mark would react to it.

Sirius rolls his sleeve down, and there's nothing going on there, just the faint scars.

Deep down, under the fear Voldemort could be back and all the chaos he'd unleash, Sirius cannot hide the *excitement* he feels at the mere possibility, however unlikely.

He doesn't want to help Voldemort, because Voldemort betrayed him, made him suffer, and he has to be punished for it, like any other would be punished for striking against Sirius. He has to suffer, just as Sirius suffers.

But Sirius always craves for him; in the beginning, the first few years after his fall, he wouldn't have been able to bare being in his presence. James's loss was too fresh, too painful, he was too hurt, he was too weak, he was too scared of Voldemort; even after he learned Harry was a Horcrux and no longer in danger because of it, Sirius feared for his own sake; he feared that nightmare he once had, where he didn't want to be with Voldemort anymore, but Voldemort didn't accept it, kept Sirius against his will. Even when things were good-*great*-with Voldemort, Sirius always had that nagging anxiety, knowing he had no resources to fight, in case he wanted out.

But Sirius is no longer weak, he is no longer a boy. His father promised him, that if Voldemort was to return, he would find Sirius a man grown into his power: magical power, political and social power.

If Voldemort came back, without Sirius' involvement, than Sirius didn't cave- Sirius wasn't so pathetic as to help him after Voldemort stabbed him in the back.

Sirius not only misses Voldemort; he understood, as the years trickled by that he misses who he was, back then, when he felt like an individual, rather than Mr Black.

He wonders if somewhere in Albania is not just Voldemort, but Sirius' love of music, his enjoyment of riding a bike, wearing muggle leather jackets, turning into Padfoot and running around the cabin; if his long hair is there with Voldemort, too; if Sirius' *passion*, that once burned so brightly, made him fee alive, took the journey to Eastern Europe with Voldemort, and left Sirius feeling so...cold.

Would all that return with Voldemort?

He trails his fingers over the faded Dark Mark; and that's how Sirius feels, too, like a faded version of himself.

There's only family; *family, family, family.* No one else is important, nothing else matters, everyone is to be ignored, discarded quickly, and his focus remains solely on the Blacks.

But Voldemort is impossible to ignore; if he were back, Sirius won't be able to just shove him away in the deepest part of his brain, keep him locked there so he can focus on family. No, if Voldemort was back, he'd have to be acknowledged, one way or the other.

If Voldemort came back, the missing parts of Sirius would return with him.

Chapter End Notes

Canonically Pollux, Arcturus and Cygnus die 2 years apart (between 90 and 92), but I compressed them into one (winter 90- winter 91), because I wanted them all dead before Harry goes to Hogwarts.

This chapter concludes the interlude. Voldemort will be back in the next one, for good, and from there on, canon will change drastically (not that this is canon, since Sirius is out of Azkaban, but just saying that once Harry hits Hogwarts, we will diverge a lot).

This interlude was the hardest to write because it covered so many years. From now on, things will come down and no more years skip.

RIP Tessuth. Also the old men, but Tessuth hit me harder than the men, really.

I hope it came out coherent and you enjoyed it, even if it covered so much ground and probably too many characters. Please, if you have the time, let me know if you liked it! ❤️

Chapter 28

“Are you excited?” Lucius asks the boys at dinner. Their last dinner before they depart for Hogwarts.

Draco nods, face flushed. “Yes, Father. I cannot wait!”

Harry smiles, but Sirius knows him well enough to tell he is nervous. His other sons brood, unhappy to be left behind. Elara scowls at everyone, arms crossed over her chest.

They have a nice dinner, though Lucius and Narcissa act as if they’re sending Draco to war instead of Scotland. Narcissa asked the elves to prepare all sixteen of Draco’s favourite meals, and she keeps thinking of new, ridiculous things to buy Draco that he might need at school, running away from the table often to note them down.

Draco tells them all how he will apparently ‘rule’ Slytherin House; Sirius heard from Corban that Lucius already bribed some of the older students to look after Draco.

Abraxas keeps shaking his head in disapproval. Sirius almost does the same.

“Your rule will end when I come, so enjoy it while it lasts,” Orion hisses.

“Oh, shut up,” Draco sneers back. “You’re a baby!”

“Orion,” Sirius warns, preemptively, before Orion can retaliate.

Harry doesn’t eat much, playing with his food, even if Narcissa had the elves prepare all his favourite meals, too.

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asks, when they return to Grimmauld and he goes with Harry to the boy’s room, to make sure he packed everything.

Harry plays with the hem of his shirt. “What if I go to Gryffindor? Like James and Lily?”

Sirius sits on the edge of the bed, draws Harry closer to him. “You most likely will.”

That upsets Harry. “But I want to be with my friends! With Draco and Theodore and Blaise, even Pansy, though she can be annoying sometimes. And they’ll all go to Slytherin. At least they seem sure of it.”

Sirius smiles at him. “I’ll tell you a secret. If you really want it, you can ask the hat to put you in Slytherin.”

“Really?” Harry brightens, hopeful.

“Yes. But it’s better if you listen to it, Harry. It will save you a lot of heartache, trust me. That hat knows what it’s doing.”

It tried to put Sirius in Slytherin, and if he had accepted it, everything would have been very different.

Harry frowns. “So I shouldn’t ask the hat for Slytherin? You think that’s bad?”

“You’re not very….Slytheriny. I don’t know how you’ll do there.” Harry will have Draco, and his friends, but he’ll be exposed to an entire house of obnoxious little shits. And while Harry can be obnoxious himself…he takes a lot after James and Lily; the kid is brave, and gallant, and honest. “There’s fucking-sorry-there’s Snape, who is Head of Slytherin. He’ll definitely be an arse to you. I don’t know. It’s your choice, kid.”

“I just don’t want to be even more different from everyone around me.”

Sirius puts an arm over his shoulders, smiles at him. “Hey, I’m the one outnumbered. Think about it, Orion is for sure a little snake. No doubt about it. Maybe there’s a tiny chance Marvolo might end up a Ravenclaw, but most likely he’ll be in Slytherin, too. So you’ll be my only son in Gryffindor.”

Harry smiles, and the frown between his brows lessens. “Yeah. Yeah. In case that happens, I’d be the only one like you.”

“And, listen, no matter what House will be blessed to have you, I know Snape will be a right cunt- sorry,” he adds, when Harry giggles. “And you’ll write to me when that happens, yes?”

Harry’s nose twitches upwards. “I’m not like Marvolo and Draco-”

“This isn’t like that. Marvolo and Draco are lil’ snitches because they tell on other kids. Snape is a grown man. And not just him- *any* grown up that picks on you, or looks at you the wrong way, or makes you uncomfortable, you’ll write to me immediately. This is the first time you’ll ever be out of my sight, out of Astrid’s, or Mum’s or Lucius’. I told you, people go crazy about that Boy-Who-Lived nonsense. So they might bother you.”

Harry nods. “Alright. I’ll tell you if an adult bothers me.”

Astrid comes in, eventually, wanting to check herself that Harry’s trunk is in order.

Just as they’re done with that, Orion and Marvolo come, too, and even when it gets late, they delay, hanging around Harry, closer than ever.

“How about we all sleep here?” Sirius suggests. “Get Harry used to sleeping in a dorm, huh?”

“YES!”

So the boys all pile up on the bed, Snuffles amongst them, and Sirius sleeps on the armchair, though he doesn’t do much sleeping. Astrid, on the other armchair, doesn’t sleep much, either, reading *Hogwarts, A History* for the first time, whispering in Norwegian from time to time, appalled with everything she discovers.

(-)

Dear Sirius,

I'm in Gryffindor tower! In your bed! Or, at least I hope so. 'S.B.' is carved in the headboard.

It's alright. I'm happy about it.

The Gryffindors seem friendly and they all cheered and clapped when I got to the table. Many stood up to shake my hand! I felt welcomed.

Draco looked really mad, though. I'll let him calm down, speak to him tomorrow after dinner.

My roommates are alright! There's Ron (he's a Weasley, and I must say Lucius was right, he does look quite…poor, but he's actually funny!) and Neville Longbottom (he is nowhere near as scary as his grandmother) and two other boys Seamus Finigan (a half-blood) and Dean Thomas (mud- muggleborn).

There was an incident on the train with another muggleborn. A very annoying girl with bushy hair and large teeth barged into our compartment and demanded we help her find a frog. Then she saw my scar and started sprouting things at me that she supposedly read in a book, said she knows all about me. It was awkward. Very impolite, but then Draco and Blaise got really nasty with her, and I felt quite bad, truth be told. She started crying. She's in Gryffindor, too.

Oh, one of the Patil twins was sorted into Gryffindor (Parvati) and the other in Ravenclaw! They were sorted right before me, and I thought if twins can go to separate Houses, then so can Draco and I, really.

Lavender is here, too! In Gryffindor, I mean. Lavender Brown, do you remember her? Her great aunt seemed to know you? We played at the park a few times. (She's the one with the curly blonde hair, Orion blushed whenever she came around us and you teased him.)

Anyway, apparently, you were wrong. The hat said I'd do very well in Slytherin! It said I am ambitious and Slytherin would help on my path to greatness. It also said I am brave and would do well in Gryffindor. It took LOADS to decide to send me here. Everyone was staring at me, but I took your advice and let it decide on its own.

Professor Dumbledore is a bit…odd. I know you said I met him before, but I can't remember. In any case, he's funny but a bit senile? His welcoming speech was silly.

I miss you all already!

With love, Harry

The stupid fucking hat was trying to sort the Horcrux. *Ambitious, my arse.*

Sirius is happy-James would have been rolling in his grave if his son ended up in the snake den.

“Harry is in Gryffindor,” Sirius announces at dinner.

No one is shocked about it. Sirius’ mum rolls her eyes. Marvolo even huffs *‘obviously’* under his breath.

“That is good?” Astrid asks, unsure.

“For a Potter,” his mother mutters, making Orion laugh.

“Yes. It’s where I went,” Sirius reminds Astrid, ignoring his mother.

She smiles. “Good, then.”

“Oh, your girlfriend is in Gryffindor, too, Orion. Lavander, was it?”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Orion snaps, slamming his fork on the table. “Gods!”

Marvolo sniggers. “You gave her all your sweets, like an idiot!”

“Orion,” Sirius warns, but Orion slaps Marvolo over the head, anyway.

“Like a gentleman,” Astrid corrects, putting a hand on Orion’s shoulder to settle him down. “Marvolo, I told you, it is polite to offer a lady your sweets if she wants them.”

Marvolo shrugs. “I never have the chance; Regina and Elara steal mine before I can offer.”

“Lavender…” his mum says. “Who is this one? Don’t think I’ve heard of her.”

Oh, no. Sirius shakes his head at Orion, who frowns in confusion, but keeps his mouth shut.

However-

“Brown,” Marvolo supplies, *helpful*. “Her great aunt loves Father, always stops to speak to him!”

“That slut!” his mother hisses, and after she sends a venomous look in Sirius’ direction, she throws her napkin on the table and leaves the room.

Astrid blinks at him. Sirius sighs. “She was one of Father’s…friends,” he clarifies.

The boys look on with curiosity.

“Oh,” Astrid nods, then looks at the boys. “Forgive your grandmother; she has a headache, she didn’t mean to say that. I don’t want you ever repeating that word, yes?”

“Yes, Mother,” Marvolo agrees, immediately. “I already know it’s a bad word.”

A week later, Orion calls his dance instructor a cunt.

A ‘frigid cunt’, to be more specific.

“Do you even know what that means?” Sirius asks, and Orion shrugs.

“I know what cun-“ He stops himself when Astrid glares at him. “What that one means,” he corrects. “I don’t know about ‘frigid’, though.”

Sirius sighs, informs Orion he won’t be seeing Regina and Regis for a week, as punishment.

“We’re in a fight, anyway,” Orion says, with another shrug, leaving the office with a skip in his steps.

“Sometimes, you go overboard for the smallest of mistakes he makes,” Astrid comments, “and other times you let him off too easily.”

Sirius shrugs.“In his defence, I had Miss Conor as a dance instructor, too. And she is a frigid cunt.”

(-)

Voldemort looks at Sirius, curious and hungry. Sirius trails his finger over his face, missing it so much.

“Why don’t you come for me if you miss me?” Voldemort asks and Sirius feels so *guilty*. “I’m in pain. Alone.”

Sirius kisses him to make him shut up. Somehow Voldemort still speaks.

“No one ever stood up for me.”

He wakes, drenched in sweat, hard as a rock and crying. Which is not unusual, sadly.

The dreams come more often now that Harry is out of the house, a visible reminder of what Voldemort cost Sirius.

It will never stop. Sirius accepted it; he will never stop wanting Voldemort. Even having his sons, his precious boys, the light of his eyes, for whom Sirius wakes up every morning no matter how awful the night has been- it doesn’t stop him from wanting Voldemort. Instead, Sirius often has -not even dreams, but awake fantasies, when he wishes Voldemort would know his boys. He’d love to tell Voldemort how cunning Marvolo is, but how sweet, at the same time; he would love to tell Voldemort about Orion’s quick wit and bravery. When Sirius spends time with Helix, he would like to present him to Voldemort, to show him innocence exists in the world, pure, unsullied. Surely, not even someone as broken as Voldemort could remain indifferent to Helix’ wide smiles, to those eyes that only reflect love and joy.

Helix' first word was 'daddy', because Sirius spends so much time with him, mourns this precious stage of life he missed with Orion and Marvolo. So he misses nothing with Helix, and Astrid doesn't begrudge him; she's busy enough as it is, and Marvolo still clings to her skirt whenever possible.

It's just impossible to not be happy when he's with Helix. If Sirius needs to stay mad at some idiot in the Ministry, he avoids Helix for a few hours, otherwise his anger would melt away.

"Orion was like that with you," his mother mentions, with a smile. "When we had bad news for him, when Cygnus would make a violent mess, or Alphard would get a new…partner, I'd just place you in his arms before we told him. You were just like Helix; such a happy, relaxed child. You almost never cried, you smiled and laughed at everything, even when your teeth were coming in, you'd just chew on your toy, made minimal fuss. I was shocked when Regulus came and he actually acted like a normal baby. And then, of course, you turned into a jealous demon and nothing satisfied you anymore."

But there won't be more babies after Helix, so Sirius hopes his little boy can keep his cheerful disposition for as long as possible.

(-)

It quickly becomes obvious it was a mistake buying Orion a wand.

"Do you want to get rid of me and couldn't think of a better way?" Marvolo whines at him, when Sirius heals the marks from the stinging hex on his shoulder.

"It's not like he didn't wipe the floor with you before he got his wand, anyway," Sirius mutters.

Marvolo gives him one of Astrid's most venomous looks; not that Astrid ever looked at Sirius that way, but he witnessed her glaring at others.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard how that came out. I shouldn't have said it," Sirius admits. "What would make you feel better?"

"Make him suffer!" Marvolo demands.

"That's not nice, Marvolo," Astrid says, looking up from her book.

"Not *nice*? Did you hear what Father said?! That was not nice! And Orion cursed me!"

"That's not a curse, it's just a harmless jinx-"

"Father!"

“Alright, alright!” Sirius throws his hands up. “Fine. I can make Orion suffer or I can buy you a wand, too. Pick.”

“Are you actually trying to kill them?” Astrid asks, in French. Marvolo just started his French lessons, so hopefully he doesn’t yet understand. “They’ll hex each other all day long.”

Marvolo’s eyes narrow. He desperately wants a wand, too. He kept begging Sirius for one ever since Orion got his. Well, he wanted one before that, like all children want wands as soon as they understand what they are.

“Make him suffer,” Marvolo picks.

I’ll be damned! Just when Sirius thinks Marvolo is too much like Astrid, there comes his Black blood, shining through.

“You’re going to pass on getting something you desperately want, just so you can hurt Orion?”

Marvolo’s jaw twitches. Brief hesitation flashes in his eyes, but then he nods.

“Yes.”

“I’m not going to offer a wand again until you turn eleven,” Sirius threatens. “That’s over three years away.”

“That’s fine,” Marvolo squares his shoulders, determined.

Well, fuck me.

“Why did he hex you?”

“Of course you’ll try to defend him!” Marvolo complains. “Mummy! Tell Father he’s not being fair! I was cursed and-!”

Astrid returns her attention to the book.

“I’m not defending him,” Sirius says, patiently. “I’m trying to understand what happened.”

“You just don’t want to punish him!”

“Oh, I’ll punish him, but I need to know how I’ll punish him.”

“As long as it hurts, I’m fine with whatever you choose.”

“So, what happened? You were just minding your own business, and he showed up and hexed you?”

Marvolo looks away.

I thought not.

“I’m going to ask him, too. And, if you were completely innocent, you’ll get your wish. However, if you weren’t, then you’ll *both* get it.”

Sirius walks away, slowly. He’s almost at the door when Marvolo yells, "fine, I’ll take the wand!”

“Gods help us,” Astrid mutters.

“Go, get your robe. We’re going to Ollivander’s.”

Who will no doubt bitch again that Sirius means to give an eight-year-old a wand.

Marvolo runs out of the room. “ORION! FATHER IS BUYING ME A WAND! DO YOU WANT TO COME WITH US?”

“See, they’ll be just fine,” Sirius tells Astrid, as one of the walls gives a little shake and noise explodes in the hallway, as if a troll collapsed.

That’s what happens every time Orion runs down the stairs with the grace of a drunk hippogriff.

“Awesome!” Orion yells back. “Now I can properly curse you, and it won’t be ungentlemanly, since you’ll have a wand, too!”

“You were saying?” Astrid asks, turning the page.

“You’re buying Marvolo a wand? Are you *insane*?” That’s his mother’s screech, coming from upstairs.

Sirius runs into the hallways, grabs the boys, one in the middle of putting his boots on, the other struggling with the robe.

He Apparates them away to Diagon.

“I only have one boot on, Father,” Marvolo points out.

“Let’s buy some shoes first, then. I had to get us out of there. Mother was coming!”

Orion nods, pulling his robe in place.

“Yes,” Marvolo says, hopping after Sirius. “Better get frost bite than set Grandma off so early in the day.”

They get Marvolo shoes from Madam Malkin though he scoffs at them, because the fur line isn’t of ‘quality’, apparently.

Orion meets Sirius’ gaze over Marvolo’s head. “And you wonder why I pick on him. He’s insufferable.”

“You only have to wear them for a day, stop whining,” Sirius hisses, and finally Marvolo settles.

They all get into a much better mood once they reach the wand shop.

Ollivander is the only unhappy one, but who cares about him? He’ll write a complaint to the Ministry again that Sirius is giving wands to kids under eleven, like he did last time, and that will be that.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, sir?” Marvolo demands, as his measurement are taken. “You look very old. Old people sometimes don’t see that well, and they go all nutty like Mrs Rowle.”

It is fun when Marvolo tortures someone else for a change.

A wand chooses him rather quickly; but then, Ollivander probably knows by now what wands respond well to Blacks.

“HA! It’s a quarter of an inch longer than Orion’s!” Marvolo gloats.

Instantly, Orion grabs the wand from Marvolo. “Want me to make it shorter?”

Ollivander tells Marvolo not to use the wand until he’s eleven. “Your older brother promised he won’t.”

Marvolo jumps around Orion, trying to get his wand back. “He lied. He uses it *all the time*. He cursed me just an hour ago!”

Sirius pulls them both out of the door. “We’re getting lunch, and we are going to have a conversation about oversharing, Marvolo.”

“What’s that?”

“What you’ve been doing your entire life,” Orion informs him. “Telltale!”

Eventually, once Sirius makes Orion give the wand back, they have a nice meal, in Marvolo’s favourite restaurant.

“I don’t think Mum calmed down yet, so how about we just walk around some more?” Sirius suggests, because he loves spending time with the little terrors.

“Can we ride the big red car with two storeys? I always wanted to ride in it!” Orion says.

Sirius frowns. “What, the bus?”

“But wouldn’t that make us blood-traitors?” Marvolo enquires.

Orion rolls his eyes. “Everything we do in muggle London makes us blood traitors. Even just walking around and eating their food.”

“What did I say about blood traitors?” Sirius asks, as they pass the barrier to muggle London, and Sirius transfigures their robes to look more like muggle long coats.

“Mama says one is a blood traitor if-”

“We can only be blood traitors if we betray our family,” Orion cuts over Marvolo. “Right, Father?”

“Exactly.”

“So I can take the bus and not be a blood traitor,” Orion tells Marvolo, “but you’re a blood traitor because you snitched on me to Ollivander!”

“No! I don’t want to be a blood traitor!”

“Then keep your bloody mouth shut!”

“Quiet, both of you! I need to figure out how we can get inside the bus,” Sirius demands. “And switch to Norwegian, I’m not in the mood to Obliviate muggles.”

“But it’s fun when you do it! They go all stupid looking- well, stupider than they already are!”

“Father, teach me how to Obliviate! I want to make Orion forget he’s the eldest!”

Sirius ends up Obliviating around twelve muggles that day, when Marvolo gets scared during the bus ride, convinced another bus would hit them on a narrow street, and in his panic he makes both buses stop to a screeching halt, in a bout of accidental magic.

On the bright side, Orion is impressed with it, and he praises Marvolo for being ‘cool’, which makes Marvolo forget about everything else.

They get along swimmingly for the rest of the day. Sirius remembers wizards have a bus, too, and Orion gets all excited, asks to ride that one, as well.

“I’m not sure how to summon it,” Sirius says. “It’s for poor and stupid people that don’t know how to Apparate.”

Just as they get back home, Sirius gets a letter from McGonagall informing him Harry got detention for getting into a fight with another student.

Harry’s owl, a beautiful, special white breed that flew on Harry’s shoulder as soon as they entered the Magical Menagerie in the summer, arrives minutes later.

“Just to warn you, you might get a letter from Professor McGonagall about a little disagreement I had with a boy. It’s totally not my fault!

Love, Harry”

Sirius proudly frames the letter from McGonagall. Harry’s first detention!

When the kids are asleep, he goes to James' grave and tells him all about it.

"I gave him the cloak before he left, too, like your dad gave it to you," Sirius says. "I know it's a Hallow, and presumably dark magic, but I figure since it never hurt us, it won't hurt him, either. Gods, I hope he gets to do a lot of mischief with it! Ah, also, my son almost caused a bus crash today!"

(-)

Harry apparently races Draco in their first flying class, and instead of getting detention, he is made a Seeker.

Sirius sends him his Nimbus 2000, the one Harry bemoaned having to leave behind.

He goes to tell James about it, reads him the letter Harry sent. "He's going to demolish all the other teams, I'm sure," Sirius says. "Kid always gets the Snitch."

Lucius puts in an order for seven Nimbus 2001, that aren't even out yet, to gift to the Slytherin Quidditch team the following year.

"You know Draco would make the team without you having to buy it, right?" Sirius asks. Draco is pretty good at flying, too.

"I know, but I want to improve Slytherin's chances."

So, Sirius pre-orders nine Nimbus 2001, for the Gryffindor team and for Orion and Marvolo. He can't wait to see McGonagall's face- that woman loves few things like she loves Quidditch.

(-)

As Sirius walks through Hogwarts' grand hallways, trying to contain his murderous thoughts and calm down before he has to face Dumbledore, he feels someone is watching him.

He turns, abruptly, snarling a 'what do you want?' before he's even facing whoever was trailing after him.

As it is, he doesn't get to face the other.

Sirius sees the hems of a purple robe whooshing over the floor, as presumably that loser Quirrell hurries away. Must be Quirrell, Harry said his Defence Professor has a turban and is scared of his own shadow.

"It's Dumbledore's fault," Lucius said, after the Board of Governors convened in the summer. *"Apparently he thought Quirrell was growing 'worryingly' obsessed with the dark arts, but he had a tight-knit contract with the school, thus Dumbledore couldn't fire him. So he moved him from Muggle Studies to the Defence post, to get rid of him by the end of the year, what with the presumed curse haunting the position. Now the fool walks around pretending he's meek and scared, as if that will make anyone forget he was daring and insolent the past few years."*

Sirius is also a school Governor, but his grandfather dealt with Hogwarts issues in his stead; since Arcturus died, there was only one meeting held, and Sirius couldn't be arsed to attend, only sent a note to Dumbledore with a request to fire Snape. He knows the Headmaster won't, but Sirius plans to ask every year, because it amuses him.

Though, maybe he'll ask the Board to fire *Dumbledore* himself, because-

"A troll?" he demands, as soon as he enters the office. "Are you fucking serious? A *troll*? Explain yourself," Sirius snarls at Dumbledore.

Harry stands at McGonagall's side, head bowed, unhappy.

"It was an unfortunate accident," Dumbledore starts.

"An accident? It's a troll. A ten feet troll. With a bat. Against three midgets!"

"Hey!"Harry complains, insulted.

"I'll get to you in a moment!" Sirius warns him, before he turns back to Dumbledore. "He could have gotten killed! You know, Lucius keeps telling me you are unfit to rule a school and I'm starting to see why!"

"Sirius-"

"Mr Black!" Sirius corrects. "One more stunt like this, Dumbledore, and I will get you removed from Hogwarts!"

Not that it's easy. If it were, Lucius would have done it long ago.

"Mr Black," McGonagall intervenes. "I understand you are upset-"

"Upset? I'm fucking furious!"

"It was my fault," she says, placating, "for not looking after my students and I take full responsibility. It will not happen again. Now, please refrain from swearing in front of Mr Potter."

As always, there's something about the woman that makes Sirius incapable of tearing into her. She looks at him, calmly, with none of Dumbledore's impertinence.

Sirius glares at the man for another second or so, before he grabs Harry by the arm and drags him out of that office.

“I’m really sorry! I didn’t go after the troll, like Snape says, I swear. Ron and I just went to make sure Hermione was safe. And if we hadn’t, I don’t want to think what would have happened to her-”

“She’d be dead,” Sirius snaps and Harry flinches. “That’s why I am upset. A troll in the school…this is ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry says again.

“Why didn’t you alert a teacher, tell them you think that girl was trapped in the bathroom with the troll? How could you think to just go there, on your own-”

“I was with Ron!”

“That makes it so much better,” Sirius spits, sarcastic.

“You’d have gone after her, too!” Harry says, looking up. “I didn’t have time to call anyone else! We just wanted to save Hermione, because it was our fault she was hiding in the bathroom, anyway! We didn’t do it to be heroes or break the rules, like Snape says! He looked disappointed I haven’t died, really, when he found us, accused me of acting the hero, and flaunting-”

“Did he, now?” Impossibly, Sirius gets *madder.*

Harry nods, eyes wide. “I’m really sorry.”

“I’m not upset with you,” Sirius says, because now all his anger shifted to the dungeon bat. “Just be more careful in the future, and stop fighting trolls, yes?”

Harry nods. “No more trolls, I promise.”

(-)

He finds Snape crowding Quirrell against a wall, acting all intimidating.

However, he’s a fucking loser that can only intimidate little children; it’s only when Sirius shows up that Quirrell bolts, making himself scarce so quickly, Sirius could swear he more flew away that walked-

I must be tired. Sirius must be seeing things that aren’t there. He had a very rough Samhain night, like all Samhain nights are for him, and after that, he had to open a letter to read Harry fought a *fucking troll.*

“That’s how you do it, Snivellus,” Sirius barks at him. “See, I just have to show up and people flee from me.”

Now it's Sirius that crowds the miserable twat against the wall. "I hear you're trying your hand at bullying, Snivellus. The problem is you're trying it with my boy. I thought I should remind you why that is a terrible idea, the worst you've had in ten years."

Snape glares at Sirius, with those black holes he has instead of eyes.

"How is it possible you got even uglier?" Sirius asks, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

Snape pulls out his wand, face twisting with hate.

Sirius laughs. "Really? You want to curse a Hogwarts Governor? Not only you got uglier, but stupider, too. Truly, life doesn't seem to agree with you. *Shut up,*" he growls, when Snape opens his mouth. "I don't care to hear what you have to say; I never did." He steps closer, towers over Snape, who still holds his wand firmly, but hesitates to do more with it.

"You know what I think, Snape? I think you should have another moonlight encounter with a four legged, furry animal. I think the first one wasn't enough to teach you a lesson. You know why it wasn't enough? Because James saved you. But you got him killed, you snivelling worm. You got him and Lily killed, and now there's no one to save you when I send Greyback after you. And I will, if I hear a single complaint against you from Harry. You know I will."

"You-" Snape hisses, going red and deathly pale at the same time. It's a funny combination. "That's all you do these days, threaten to set the werewolf on people? Brave Gryffindors should fight their own battles-"

"You're unworthy of my wand. Curses are wasted on you. I even feel sorry for Greyback, to stain his fangs with your disgusting body…a pity. Alas, that's why I have minions, to spare me of such undignified tasks. You'd like to have minions, too, no doubt. You'd love to have the means to set a werewolf on someone; that's why you're on a power trip with the children, you fucking arsehole, because they're the only ones powerless enough to listen to you. But you don't have anything, that's the truth. Remember, I used to tell you, when we were kids ourselves? That you'll die alone and unwanted? Seems I was right. No doubt you're still sleeping with Lily's picture on your pillow, since the poor photograph can't exactly protest to your pathetic presence. At least have the decency not to antagonise her son- the one that you orphaned."

"Sirius," a firm voice calls from the end of the hallway.

It's Dumbledore's no nonsense voice, very different from how he sounded half an hour ago.

"Oh, sorry," Sirius hisses at Snape. "I forgot you do have someone. A master to serve. A *new* one, that is. You've forsaken the first one, after all-"

"Sirius!" Dumbledore's voice gets even steelier, and it's coming closer.

"Stay away from Harry, you greasy pice of shit," Sirius warns, and then turns and storms away.

And if that weird Quirrell stalks after him again, he's going to meet the bad end of Sirius' wand. He's reached the limit of his patience for the night.

For the entire fucking year, actually.

(-)

Sirius' dreams shift.

They don't take place in Godric's Hollow, anymore. There's no dead James, no dead Voldemort.

No, he's alive in these dreams. They're in the cabin, usually in bed, but other times Sirius plays the piano, or Voldemort cooks.

And then he'll kiss Sirius, holding him close, or he'll place a hand on Sirius' shoulder as he plays, or he'll turn his head to look over his shoulder at Sirius as he cooks.

And he'd say, "You are angry with me because I placed my life over your friend's, but you are placing your pride over my life."

And he'd say, arms around Sirius, in their bed, holding tight, but not possessive, just desperate, needy, his lips on Sirius' year, and he says, "you're the only one that ever stood up for me."

And he'd say, as he takes Sirius' hand in his own, in the kitchen, "I trusted you. I need you."

And Sirius wakes up crying, a deep pain in the centre of his chest.

From the other nightmares that plagued him for ten years, he'd wake up in a panic, he'd wake up with a sharp pain, but his one-

This one is *deep*, not sharp, and yet more encompassing.

Fuck it, Sirius thinks, eventually, after one of these dreams, as he curls around himself in bed. *Fuck it, I'm going after him.*

But he gets up, he takes a shower, and then he feels more…he feels more like Mr Black, he sees his face in the mirror, the Black ring on his finger, and his resolve shatters when faced with reality.

He still prefers these dreams over the previous ones. Those were from trauma; the dreams he had when wearing the ring were fabricated by Tom.

These, though- these are all Sirius.

One morning, when he wakes up, he goes to the cabin, Apparates straight from his bedroom, in only his pyjama trousers.

He cleans up a bit, as he always does when he comes to the cabin, every now and then. Sometimes he comes to drop off a gift he bought for Voldemort. He's not buying things on purpose- sometimes he's just out and about, in Britain or another country, and he sees a book, or a dark artefact, or a painting, a robe, a special lighter and he thinks 'Voldemort would enjoy this' and before he knows it, he's already purchased whatever it was.

Throughout the years, the pile of gifts grew quite large. Sirius ran out of space to store the items, so now they're just all over the kitchen counters and the empty pantry.

After he cleans the dust, Sirius takes a bath in that luxurious claw-footed tub.

He relaxes there, in hot water, feels tension from his shoulder disappearing in the hot water, down the drain.

After that, he opens one of the gifts meant for Voldemort- a two hundred years old wine from Sicily- and drinks it all.

He's so sleepy and …*soft*…he crawls into the bed, and sleep for ten hours straight, uninterrupted, with no dreams or nightmares, just rest.

(-)

Greyback seems nervous, as Sirius stands in front of him.

It's unusual; nothing phases the werewolf, so it puts Sirius on edge to see him like this.

Greyback is one of the few people Sirius meets that is taller than him, and usually the werewolf takes pride in it, looming and imposing, but this day, he is…defensive.

He's the one that wanted to meet with Sirius, about a 'misunderstanding'.

"I want you to know the matter is already settled, and the culprit chastised," Greyback says.

"Oh, fuck," Sirius hisses. "Who was bitten!? You best hope it wasn't a fucking child-"

"No one was bitten," Greyback cuts over him.

Sirius narrows his eyes. "Killed?"

"No."

Well, then it can't be that bad. "Just fucking tell me, don't make me guess."

Greyback breathes in. Out. "It's one of my sons. Hati."

“Oh, fuck,” Sirius sighs. That’s Greyback’s youngest, the most arrogant and rebellious, that always snarls back to Sirius, does his best to look imposing.

He might be…eventually. He’s as tall as Sirius, twice as wide, but he’s just a puppy, like Greyback mocks him.

Greyback stares at Sirius. “As I said, the matter is already settled and he received his punishment-”

“What did he do?”

“Truth be told, it wasn’t his fault! It was the girl that chased after him.”

Sirius blinks.

“Since you brought her here; Hati said she told him to contact her-”

“For fuck’s sake! Dora??”

Greyback watches him carefully. *Fearfully.* “As I said, as soon as I caught wind of it, I made him end it.”

“They were fucking?”

Greyback nods, and then, hurriedly, “she was the one to start it! He knows better than to chase after high-born girls like that, but what’s a boy to do when-”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “You better pray to all the gods you have that her mother or aunts don’t catch wind of this, Greyback, or you’re dead and nothing on earth or beyond can save you.”

“I remember Bellatrix,” Greyback spits, but some of the tension melts from him. “I rather thought *you* won’t be too pleased, either-”

“I’m not pleased,” Sirius barks. “By no means! But…I know Dora.”

She pestered Sirius into taking her with him to the pack, for years. For a long time Sirius assured her he doesn’t know Greyback, that those are just rumours, but eventually, after she was willing to commit a crime to cover for Sirius and Bella’s *trip* to France, he had to concede that she’s no longer a kid and she’s to be trusted with the family secrets.

So he took her to meet the pack, because she’s fascinated with dangerous creatures.

Apparently *more* than fascinated.

“Wow, he’s hot,” was the first thing she said to Sirius upon meeting Greyback.

And Sirius just nodded, which made her eyebrow rise high in surprise, and then she cackled, eerily like Bellatrix.

“As long as she isn’t pregnant, and you already made your son end it…” Sirius shrugs.

“Oh, it ended. I give you my word. I don’t know how he managed to keep it hidden from me for months, but I finally caught her scent lingering around him-”

Sirius holds up a hand. “I don’t wanna know!”

“Alright, then.”

(-)

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Sirius ambushes her in Evy’s kitchen.

She looks at him over her shoulder. Today, she looks more like Regulus, with short hair, and wider shoulders. It’s rare to find her looking the same two days in a row. Some foreign guests that went to Malfoy Manor ask Narcissa about that ‘handsome nephew’ of hers. “Oh, you found out?”

“A werewolf?”

She shrugs, returns to her failing attempt at making a sandwich.

“He’s a true born! He can turn at will, and he retains his mind during transformation! There was no danger!”

“He’s a natural predator-”

“Auntie says you let a vampire bite you! You have no room to talk!”

If only the vampire was the most dangerous creature I allowed at my throat, Sirius thinks.

“If your mother or *Auntie* finds out-”

“They won’t. Unless you tell them.” She turns around to grin at him. “Relax, it was just a bit of fun. Not like I’ll marry him! Besides, I think he grew bored with me, he hadn’t come around in a couple of weeks.”

Sirius opens his mouth, thinks better of it, then nods. “Werewolves get bored quickly,” he says, pulling that fact right out of his arse.

She shrugs. “It was fun while it lasted.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re making me understand my mother, and I hate it. This is surely payback for all the shit I did as a teenager.”

No doubt it’s some cosmic joke on Andromeda, too. She’d understand Cygnus really fast, if she hears her daughter is messing around with a werewolf.

Not to mention Dora's blase attitude about sex outside of marriage. That is sure to give Andromeda and Narcissa a heart attack.

"Please, be careful. If you're going to pull stupid, dangerous shit like this, at least let me know, yeah?"

She smiles, comes closer to kiss his cheek. It's weird, because she looks like Regulus, and Regulus hasn't kissed Sirius since he was three years old or something.

"You're the coolest Head of House ever, Sirius," she says.

He snorts. His ancestors are probably turning in their graves.

(-)

It really is a pleasure, watching Harry fly. It aways was, but this is the first 'formal' game, and some of his opponents are seventeen and very determined to win. It's not just a friendly match at Malfoy Manor.

He's *brilliant*. Sirius hopes James is looking down at him with pride.

Orion shouts loudly at his side, and Sirius gave up on trying to force him to stay seated. Marvolo, on Sirius' other side, seems more interested in Dumbledore, siting on the row in front of them.

When Harry catches the Snitch, Orion shouts so loudly, Sirius' ear starts ringing.

Before Harry is engulfed by his teammates, once he lands, he looks up and waves at Sirius, grinning like a maniac, fist raised high, the snitch held tightly in his grip.

Dumbledore, who must have felt Marvolo staring holes into his back the entire game, turns with a smile.

"Sirius," he says, with a nod.

Sirius nods back.

"Young Orion, you've grown tall!"

"Yes," Orion says, with an arrogant shrug. He really is growing like a weed.

Last he took Orion to Hogwarts, a couple of years before, to a Governor meeting, after the little pest insisted so much he gave Sirius a headache, Orion inspected Dumbledore and said *'you don't look as impressive as you do in your chocolate frog card'*. Dumbledore laughed and offered him a lemon drop.

And here come the lemon drops again, out of nowhere, Dumbledore offering the bag to Orion, who takes one, and then to Marvolo, who refuses.

“No, thank you.”

“You must be Marvolo,” Dumbledore says.

“Yes. And you must be aware the blue is clashing horribly with the green, sir. You should go to Twilfitt and Tattings or, better yet, to Paris, to get nicer robes. My mother knows some places.”

Sirius and Orion groan at once.

It amuses Dumbledore tremendously, eyes sparkling with joy. McGonagall, beside him, hides a smile.

“What did I say about offering unsolicited advice to people?” Sirius asks.

“I’m doing him a favour,” Marvolo ‘whispers’, but he needs to work on his whispering skills, since at least six people laugh around them.

“No such thing as unsolicited advice,” Dumbledore claims. “As long as it’s given with honest intention, I’ll gladly take it.”

“You’re welcome,” Marvolo says, and then, to Sirius, “see, he didn’t mind.”

“A Black, through and through,” Flitwick mutters, as he walks past them.

Marvolo beams, standing straighter. “Did you hear that, Father?”

“Another one?” Dumbledore asks, offering the sweets to Orion again.

“Sure, thanks!” Orion grabs another drop.

“Keep it,” Dumbledore says, shoving the entire bag in his arms.

“He shouldn’t have sugar,” Sirius complains. “He’s worse when he’s on sugar.”

“It was good to see you,” Dumbledore says. Bending slightly, he looks at Marvolo closely. “And it was good to meet you.”

“He knew my name,” Marvolo boasts, as Sirius takes them down the stairs, in the direction of the locker room, to say ‘hi’ to Harry before they return to Grimmauld. “He’s famous, but he knew my name!”

Orion rolls his eyes. “*Everyone* knows our names, stupid! We’re Blacks, of course they’d know!”

“Most people just know yours, since you’re the Heir!”

“Stop fighting for a minute, will you?” Sirius barks at them, his ear still ringing. “And Orion, don’t shout in public. At least not around me.”

“Fine,” Orion agrees, nonchalant.

“I want a lemon drop,” Marvolo says, trying to get his hand into the bag. Orion pulls it away.

“You said no when the old man offered!”

“Because I’m not supposed to take sweets from strangers!” Marvolo explains. “But you’re not a stranger, sadly. Come on, give me one!”

“No!”

“Just one!”

“No!”

“Father!” Marvolo whines. “Orion won’t share his sweets with me!”

“*One*,” Sirius starts counting, making sure to infuse all the warnings in his tone. “*Two*.” Both boys settle down before Sirius gets to three.

It’s blissfully silent until they reach the locker room.

Harry hugs them all, and Orion gives him the bag of sweets, which makes Marvolo upset again; Harry gives Orion the Snitch he caught, which further upsets Marvolo.

They start fighting again as soon as they head for Hogsmeade and they don’t stop until Sirius slaps them both over the head and confiscates the snitch.

(-)

As soon as Sirius, Astrid, and Harry come through the door, Orion and Marvolo ambush them in the hallway, asking about Hogwarts, with Snuffles howling around them, almost knocking Harry down in his excitement to see him again.

“Bad dog,” Marvolo says, sternly, after Snuffles accidentally slaps his face with a wagging tail. “I wish Padfoot was our dog, he’s so much better behaved!”

Sometimes, Sirius turns into Padfoot and hangs out with the boys; Sirius told them he’s a special dog, that only comes around when he’s needed, if the kids are sad, or upset in any way, to cheer them up.

After Arcturus died, but Orion refused to talk about it with Sirius or Astrid, Padfoot would sneak into Orion’s room at night, climb into his bed, and Orion would hug him tightly and

cry into his fur until he fell asleep.

"I'm good now," Orion said, one night, after a few weeks. *"I feel better, Padfoot. Perhaps you can visit Father and Marvolo,"* he suggested. *"Not that I don't want you to stay with me, I'd like for you to live here with us all the time, but Father and Marvolo are sad, too, you know." He kisses Padfoot's snout. "They might need you."*

It's great having Harry back home. Kid has the brightest smile, that doesn't fade even when Sirius' mum makes a face at the Gryffindor colours on Harry's uniform.

"Should bring back fond memories of Sirius," Harry says, mischievously, knowing very well she hated Sirius being in Gryffindor.

Harry demands to see Helix before they can have dinner, and is awed with how much Helix has grown.

"He looks just like you," he tells Sirius. "Wow."

Helix studies Harry curiously, but then he smiles, as he's prone to smile at everyone, and attempts to grab Harry's glasses off his face.

"Careful," Sirius warns. "He's grabby, and he bites!"

There's some tension between Harry and Draco when they meet at Malfoy manor for the first day of Yule, but they get over it rather fast.

(-)

"You understand I can't go over your mother's word, right?" Sirius asks Dora when she sits in front of him.

He has a strong sense of déjà vu. He even glances to the couch where he once sat doing homework while Bella asked his father to let her go to Germany.

"I know," Dora says. "*I* am going over her word," she explains. "Sirius, she's not stopping me. Father isn't going to stop me, either. And I have some gold from Grandfather to get me going, at least fore a while!"

Dora is set on going to Romania, to study dragons. Andromeda isn't happy with her. Bella isn't happy with Andromeda. Narcissa isn't happy with Bella, for 'undermining' Andromeda.

"But it's hard getting permission to live on the dragon reserve! I have the gold, but they tell me they already filled all the spaces, and that I'll need to find someplace else to live. I am going, and if I have to, I'll live in a tent!" she promises, incensed. "But I thought to ask you, first, if you'd speak to the supervisor there…maybe he would find a place in the reserve if *you* ask him."

Sirius sighs. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She grins, then comes around the desk to kiss him on the cheek. “You’re the best cousin!”

This discussion is followed by *many* others, with Andromeda, Bella and Narcissa.

“It’s not that she’s a girl, you idiot!” Andromeda screams at Bella. “It’s because she’s a *child*! And she’s so clumsy, have you met her? She can’t live alone in a foreign country! She’s barely eighteen!”

“Then go with her!” Bella snarls.

“NO!” Narcissa argues, glowering at Bella, her fingers curling possessively around Andromeda’s arm. “I just got her back and you want to send her away!?”

“She was here for ten fucking years!” Bella yells back.

Sirius keeps trying to speak, but no one lets him, he doesn’t have the time to get a word in, with the way they’re yelling over each other.

Lucius long fled to play with the kids, and Sirius watches out the window, longingly, wishing to be outside with them, enjoying the very beautiful gardens of Malfoy Manor and what appears to be a game of Quidditch.

“She’s going, anyway,” Bella says.

“Because you are giving her gold!” Andromeda accuses her.

“She already has gold from Father-”

“But you’re giving her more, to encourage her! She’s too young to be there! She’ll be working with dragons! *Dragons*, Bellatrix!”

“She’s an intelligent, powerful woman! She can handle-”

“She’s a child!” Andromeda yells.

“I will go with her.”

Silence falls as they all turn to stare at Druella.

“*Mother*?”

“You?”

They all stare at her in shock.

“Yes,” Druella says, standing in the doorway. “The child is as stubborn as any Black. I learned from previous experiences-” she glares at Andromeda, “that it is useless to fight it. At least she only wants to study, not run off with a muggle.”

“Ted is a *wizard*,” Andromeda mumbles.

“You didn’t want *me* to study!” Bella spits.

“Not alone,” Druella counters. “And I couldn’t come with you, because I had Narcissa here, too young to abandon, and I had a husband. Now, you’re all grown and Cygnus is dead.” She straightens her shoulders. “So I shall go with her. Of course, we won’t be living on the dragon reserve, with the peasants,” she goes on, nose wrinkling. “Sirius, arrange for us to get a villa somewhere close by. At least two storeys, and I demand a garden; where else am I suppose to have my tea?”

No one is really ecstatic; Dora doesn’t want to go with her grandmother, Druella keeps bitching about every house Sirius finds them, Andromeda still isn’t convinced her daughter will be safe, and Bella and Narcissa are jealous their mother never supported them with anything.

But no one is truly unhappy, either.

A nice compromise.

Well, *Lucius* is happy. He finally got rid of Druella, who has been living at Malfoy Manor since Cygnus died.

After all these yeas, Sirius is still shocked that everything ends up in Lucius’ favour, somehow.

(-)

“They sent them to the fucking Forest!” Lucius hisses.

Sirius tries to recall when was the last time he heard Lucius swear. He can’t remember such an occasion.

It sounds a bit *hot*, what with that drawl.

“I am going to kill Dumbledore! The Forest! At night! With Hagrid!”

“You must do something, Lucius!” Narcissa looks just as mad. “Get the man fired! This is unacceptable!”

“Worse, the dumb giant wasn’t even with them! He sent Draco and Harry, alone! Draco claims he saw a hideous creature supping on a dead unicorn!”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “I’m sure he did,” he mutters. *As if.* Draco likes to exaggerate. Besides, from what Sirius understood from the letters- the ones from Harry and McGonagall- it was Draco telling on Harry that got them in this mess to begin with.

Little snitch.

“Hagrid had a dragon! A dragon! And they punish my son for informing these idiots about it? Oh, someone is going to pay for this, mark my words!”

“Yes, make them pay,” Narcissa encourages Lucius. Astrid tries to comfort her, at her side, a hand on Narcissa’s back.

“I’ve served loads of detention in the Forest,” Sirius argues. “It’s *fun*! Stop being such cry babies about it!”

Lucius goes on a campaign to remove Dumbledore as Headmaster, as he tries every single year, to no success.

No one believes him Hagrid had a dragon, since apparently Ron, Harry’s friend, arranged with his brother Charlie that works at a dragon reserve to send some mates to get the dragon before an adult could discover it.

“I know Charlie,” Dora says, when she comes for a visit. “He’s a good man.”

Sirius hopes she isn’t fucking him. Or, if she is, that she’s discrete about it. He really doesn’t want Druella yelling at him about it.

(-)

When he gets a Patronus from Dumbledore, something that hasn’t happened since the height of the war, summoning Sirius to Hogwarts urgently, he just knows something horrible happened.

‘Use the floo,’ the misty phoenix says.

Sirius steps out into the Headmaster’s office just seconds later.

“Harry is alive, and will fully recover,” Dumbledore says, immediately, standing beside his desk, and something in Sirius first relaxes, because he’d thought of the worst, but then immediately gets angry, because it means something *did* happen to Harry.

“Where is he?”

“In the Hospital Wing. No,” Dumbledore adds, when Sirius walks to the door. “He is fine, Sirius-”

“I want to see him!”

“You will. But we need to talk. I give you my word, Harry is fine, he is simply asleep right now.”

“I will see him- open the fucking door, damn you!” Sirius screams at him when the door doesn’t open for him. He pulls out his wand and turns on Dumbledore, feeling the same powerlessness he felt ten years ago, when he went to retrieve Harry from those muggles and Dumbledore threatened he will take Harry from Sirius.

And he’s not used to feeling powerless anymore. But now he can’t open a fucking door to get to Harry, and all those feelings from that Samhain return, the impotence he experienced, the dread when he found James dead and Sirius couldn’t do *anything*-

Dumbledore pays no attention to the wand Sirius aims at him, only reinforcing Sirius’ desperation, the knowledge that this man is untouchable.

But, unlike that time in the muggle’s house, Dumbledore’s eyes are kind. And concerned.

“Sirius, please. Harry is fine and you shall see him immediately. But-”

“Nothing you have to say is more important than seeing him! Nothing!”

“It was Voldemort,” Dumbledore says, and Sirius’ knees feel weak. He slumps against the door.

(-)

Harry looks so small in the hospital bed. It breaks Sirius’ heart to see him like that, even if Dumbledore and Poppy assured him he is just sleeping.

There’s a bushy-haired girl sitting beside him, perched at the edge of the bed.

“Hermione?” Sirius guesses.

She startles, turns around to look at him, stands hurriedly. “Yes, sir. Are you Mr Black?”

“Sirius.” He extends a hand, and she takes it, surprised. She’s *tiny*. Only made of hair and teeth, really.

“I’m sorry, Mr Black-”

“Sirius,” he repeats.

“I left him there, alone- but I had to-”

It’s a horrible day; Sirius is reeling, mind going in loops, yet this girl, and the redhead in the next hospital bed, snoring lightly- these kids make it just a little better.

He smiles at her. “You’re very brave. And a good friend.” Dumbledore told him all that transpired.

She blushes; Harry said in his letters Hermione had so many issues finding friends, that she's a tad antisocial and has no idea how to behave around people. *"She's unlikable, but only until you get to know her,"* he once wrote home.

"Thank you for being there for Harry," he says, softly, and she only grows redder.

"Of course," she says, determined, her shoulder straightening.

There's a couple of redheads around Ron's bed- no adults; perhaps the Weasleys have so many children, they don't care much if one kicks it or is occasionally in mortal danger.

The teenagers watch Sirius curiously, with distrust.

But there's no one there for the girl; she looks uninjured, but still. Sirius knows her parents weren't even told what happened, not the true extent of it. Muggle parents are always kept in the dark, and in no small part because they don't understand.

They wouldn't know who Voldemort is, or what a Philosopher Stone means, or what their daughter accomplished, placing herself in the path of one for the cruelest, most powerful dark lords in history.

"Are you alright?" Sirius asks. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine," she says. If she blushes any further, she'll catch fire, so he leaves her alone and sits on the edge of the bed.

The girl leaves, eventually, as Sirius keeps his vigil. Harry seems at ease, his breathes strong, but even, his features lax.

Sirius takes his hand, and he smiles, knowing Harry would throw a tantrum at having his hand held in a public setting.

He tries very, very hard not to think of Voldemort. Not now. He has to hold it together for his kid.

An older Weasley comes, and this one doesn't glare at Sirius; instead, he makes the teens return to their common room, and he nods respectfully at Sirius, mutters a 'sir'.

For a second, Sirius entertains himself trying to recall or guess the names, but he gives up. He is sure Harry mentioned them, but they didn't stick. Well, Ron did, but that's about all the brain space he's willing to waste on that family.

Astrid comes a couple of hours later, escorted by a very disgruntled looking Snape.

As soon as she sees Sirius, she makes a dismissive gesture with her hand at Snape, and that only makes Snape angrier, but he takes the opportunity to fuck off.

"How is he?" Astrid asks, sitting on the other side of Harry, checking his forehead with her palm. "What on earth happened now?"

“He’s fine. I’ll tell you later.”

“This school is ridiculous,” she mutters, more incensed than he usually sees her. “Trolls, dragons, now whatever this is…Lucius was right. It isn’t safe. I want you to consider sending our sons to Durmstrang. I promise you, the Headmaster and teachers are all competent there! That fool that escorted me to the Hospital Wing- he looks like a mudblood-”

“Half-blood,” Sirius corrects.

She sneers. “He looks like a homeless muggle. Don’t you have standards here? A dressing code? An understanding one has to wash their hair?”

“Did you bully him?” Sirius enquires.

She huffs. “Maybe.”

“I love you,” Sirius tells her.

Dumbledore said Snape was trying to protect Harry, that he was keeping an eye on ‘Quirrell’. Sadly, it doesn’t make Sirius hate Snape any less.

If he’d kept his mouth shut, none of this would have happened. James would be here to hold his son’s hand, to fight with Dumbledore over trolls and dragons and the general death trap that is Hogwarts. Snape can rip out his heart and give it to Harry, and Sirius will never forgive him.

The way he couldn’t forgive Peter.

Or himself.

Strange, isn’t it, how he blames all of them, holds onto the grudges, and yet….

And *yet.*

He finds more and more excuses for Voldemort; even as he tries not to think about him, not now, with Harry lying unconscious in a hospital bed, his mind is already filled with excuses.

How it’s Dumbledore’s fault for bringing the stone to Hogwarts; and oh, how he yelled at Dumbledore for that one.

How it’s Sirius’ fault for not investigating his suspicious about Quirrell stalking him around on Halloween.

How it’s *Harry*’s fault for trying to be a hero.

Already, Sirius absolved Voldemort, and it’s *terrifying*. His mind whispers that Voldemort didn’t attack Harry this time- he was going for the stone, and it was Harry that put himself in his way.

He hates it, but he can’t help it.

Astrid frowns at his side, bends to lay a hand on his shoulder, and Sirius reminds himself he cannot think of Voldemort right now, because he'll unravel and it's obviously flickering on his face.

"He'll be alright," Astrid says.

Sirius nods, uses Occlumency to make order in his mind. "I know."

In the morning, Ron wakes up. As Poppy fusses over him, checks him over, Ron only asks, 'how is Harry? Where is Hermione?'

When Poppy declares he's healthy and he can return to the common room, the curtain around his bed is drawn aside, and Ron spills out of the bed, awkwardly tall for his age.

He hesitates when he sees Sirius and Astrid, shy, but he makes himself step closer, to look at Harry.

Sirius introduces himself, and when Ron offers his full name back, Astrid allows herself to smile at him, slightly.

Before leaving, Ron shyly transfers the sweets that his siblings left for him to Harry's nightstand, and then he mumbles he'll go find Hermione.

"What a sweet boy, may Freya bless his little heart," Astrid says, and discreetly vanishes the sweets, whispers she'll send Harry *proper* ones, from France.

She leaves, too, not long after, because while Helix is a cheerful baby, he grows angsty if too much time passes and he doesn't see his mother.

(-)

"My scar was hurting for a while." Harry says, when he's awake. "I didn't want to worry you, though. I thought it was somehow related to Snape, that -I don't know, he was being an arse and causing me headaches. But it wasn't him."

"Why would you try to protect the stone, Harry? What possessed you to go after it?"

"I don't know. It was the right thing to do, I guess."

Such a blood Gryffindor. Such a Potter.

"It was horrible," Harry says, and he looks down, his voice a low whisper. "*He* was hanging out the back of Quirrell's head. He said he'll bring back my parents and stuff. And then he touched me and it hurt so bad and I touched back and-" He looks at Sirius, eyes wide and terrified. "I killed Quirrell!"

Sirius tries very hard not to picture it in his mind; his poor kid trapped in a room, terrified.

“Voldemort killed Quirrell. You had nothing to do with it.”

Well, from what Harry and Dumbledore described, it was a combination of Harry’s blood protection and Voldemort leaving his body after using it for a year that killed the idiot, but no point in splitting hairs.

“I suppose…” Harry sounds unconvinced. “I think I saw *him* in the forest, too. That night, on detention, after Norbert. I saw a shadow bent over a unicorn, drinking its blood.” Harry gulps. “Draco saw it, too, and he ran away, but it’s like I couldn’t look away, it was…almost fascinating. But then centaurs came, and the shadow disappeared, and they said many dangerous creatures live in the forest, so I just thought it was normal or something-”

“Harry, look at me.” He grabs Harry’s chin and raises his head a little. ”You have to stop with this nonsense. It’s alright to break rules to have fun-not to protect artefacts from dark lords. That’s not your place.”

“I tried telling a professor last night, when I thought Snape was going after the stone! But Dumbledore was gone, and McGonagall dismissed us! I wrote to you that I’m going after it-”

“Then you should have waited for me to get the letter!”

“Well, it’s a long journey from here to London! He’d have gotten the stone if I waited for you-”

“And what?” Sirius asks. “What if he got the stone? What’s that to do with you? Why would you involve yourself in something that doesn’t concern you?”

“It’s the right thing to do!” Harry insists. “And-I don’t know! I spent almost all year trying to discover the mystery! It was an adventure!”

“You could have died,” Sirius says. “Ron or Hermione could have died. Is solving a mystery or annoying a dark wizard worth the life of your friends, Harry?”

“No,” Harry says, deflating.

“Is it worth breaking mine and Astrid’s hearts? Did you even think of us, of your brothers, if instead of finding you in this bed, we’d have found you dead?”

“I’m sorry!” Harry says, looking paler and paler. “I’m sorry, I - I didn’t-”

“I had to find your father’s body. Do you want me to one day find yours?”

Sirius almost feels bad for saying it, but it must be said. He’d say anything to make sure Harry stops with this stupid heroic acts.

Harry throws himself at him with such force it almost knocks Sirius off the bed.

The kid is trembling, hugging tightly. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t think! I promise I won’t ever do anything like that again! I swear!”

“If you ever just hear Voldemort’s name, you walk the other way, you understand? You *run* the other way. You don’t go to him. You don’t get involved. Or have you started believing the Boy-Who-Lived tale? Fancy yourself an invincible hero?”

“No, no!” Harry denies it, hotly, arms so tight around Sirius that if he were a little bigger, it would hurt.

Sirius lies his chin on top of Harry’s head, hugs him back. “Don’t do this to me again, kiddo. Promise!”

“I promise! Please, don’t be mad at me-”

“You’re eleven, your brain is still tiny,” Sirius says, and he nudges Harry, playfully. “I understand. You didn’t think of consequences. That’s my fault, probably, coupled with your age. I always let you get away with everything. But now you understand there are consequences, terrible ones-”

“I do!”

He hopes Harry is smarter than Sirius. That he truly understands. Sirius hadn’t. Not until he was in his twenties and found James and Voldemort dead in that house; not until he was dragged to Azkaban.

“Alright, then.” Sirius kisses his forehead. “You’ll be alright.”

“I…” Harry whispers in his chest. “*He* asked me about you.”

Sirius draw back to look at him, and he sees fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

Harry wipes them away, tries to hide in Sirius’ chest again.

“When he was pretending to be Quirrell. He took me aside after one of my first Defence classes, he said he used to know you long ago, and asked how you were doing these days. I thought it was a bit weird, but I couldn’t imagine -Sirius, I couldn’t have known-I didn’t tell him much, just that you’re cool, but I shouldn’t have said anything! I am so sorry!”

“That’s not your fault.” Sirius tries very, very hard not to think about it, about Voldemort standing face to face with what he considers his nemesis, the boy that destroyed him, and asking about Sirius, instead.

(-)

They leave Britain as soon as Harry recovers; Sirius would like to go to the United States, but Astrid doesn't suffer the long journey, not the boat, and not the plane Sirius convinced her to take the last time they went there. She swore she won't ever step foot west of Iceland, so they go to Russia instead, since the Emperor will celebrate seventy-five years of ruling, anyway.

Lucius was invited to the week long celebrations, so he and Narcissa come along.

It's Harry's first time in Russia. The boy recovers fast after his ordeal, resilient as only children can be.

Sirius isn't as lucky.

He told his fellow Death Eaters about what transpired at Hogwarts; debates followed, if they should now hurry to find and bring Voldemort back, but Lucius said it's too late by now, that Voldemort obviously doesn't trust them, since he was in Scotland for an entire year and didn't *contact any of them for assistance.*

"The damage to our relationship with him is already done," he told the others. *"No point in doing it now."*

"But what if he manages to come back again, on his own?" Corban asked.

"We'll deal with it when he does."

Sirius had hoped someone would bring him back, spare him of the decision.

Alas, almost all of them fled Britain for a holiday. Yaxley went to Peru, Nott fucked off to Japan- they're all a tad frazzled by Voldemort's brief return.

Daily, Sirius tells himself he must bring Voldemort back. He tells himself it's for Harry's sake. Since the man is obviously able to return, Sirius has to tell him to leave Harry alone, that he's a Horcrux.

It's for Harry's sake, he keeps thinking, but he can't lie to himself; if he brings Voldemort back, it's for his own desires.

He tries distracting himself with court drama; the Emperor doesn't look frailer, despite his advanced age. On the contrary, the fucker looks the picture of health as he sits on his throne, with that heavy crown perched on his head.

The Crown Prince is growing a tad impatient, Sirius hears.

The concubine sits at the Emperor's side at the table, stands at his side by the throne, constantly whispering in his ear.

Sirius' in-laws are there, as well, and it delights Orion and Marvolo, who adore their grandfather. Astrid's mother and her sisters dote on Helix, marvel over his sweet disposition; even when he randomly starts biting people, they think it's 'just adorable'.

Watching Marvolo and Orion around so many other children, seeing them trailing behind Thor, who looms over all other men around, makes Sirius realise how tall his boys will grow, surely even taller than himself. They're already as tall or even taller than boys several years older than them.

Harry gets ignored by Astrid's side of the family; they're not mean to him or anything, they always bring Harry a gift when they visit, but they do not consider Harry part of the family, never will.

The Russian court doesn't care that much about purity, focused on names and wealth rather than blood, and most of them don't even realise Harry is a half-blood, anyway. They see him as Sirius' son, simply because Sirius refers to him as such, so at least Harry doesn't get excluded by the other children; and he has Draco with him.

Harry and Draco can't bully anyone fortunately, what with the language barrier, but Astrid taught their sons Russian during the past year; Sirius is glad he can't understand them, but they sure make use of their tenuous grasp on the language to antagonise and annoy other children.

When people come to Sirius to complain, he directs them to Thor. Let the man deal with it.

Poor Marvolo is thrilled for a while because Orion sides with him against the others; however, Orion's charm eventually allows him to be welcomed into several groups of children, and Marvolo is pushed aside once more.

Harry and Draco don't want to hang out with him either, understandably so, what with his habit of telling on them.

Eventually he seems to befriend a group of elderly women, who like gossiping with him.

Sirius sometimes spots him sitting with the old crones, in several odd places around the Palace; if not that, then he's hanging out with Astrid and Narcissa, or follows Thor around like a puppy.

Once or twice, Lady Olesya, the Emperor's concubine, walks around the gardens with her daughter and Marvolo, seemingly delighted with him.

At night, he's almost always in Sirius' room, talking his ear off about the most boring things imaginable.

Sirius is glad of the company. He can't sleep anyway, *obsessively* thinking about Voldemort; it's easier to pass the night with Marvolo there.

It reminds Sirius why he shouldn't bring Voldemort back, watching his son sleeping soundly, one hand around his plush dragon, his head on Sirius' chest.

I can't throw Britain into a war and ruin their childhood, Sirius thinks.

But Harry is not safe, if Voldemort doesn't find out he's a Horcrux.

He keeps oscillating between these thoughts, drinks most of the day. And most of the night, too, if Marvolo goes to Astrid, instead.

(-)

Upon their return to Britain, they find out Elara had dragon pox, so Regulus stayed home with her; Abraxas, apparently, was 'busy'. Nott was in Japan, Corban in Peru.

In their absence, the Wizengamot passed a bill allowing Aurors to raid houses of former Death Eaters in pursuit of dark artefacts.

"Why can't I kill Avery, again?" Sirius asks Lucius, because he really wants to hurt Avery and Parkinson, that apparently were dumb enough to allow this to happen.

"He owes me gold," Lucius answers, a tick in his jaw.

Lucius is especially peeved, because the bill was drafted by none other than Arthur Weasley, and Lucius already hates the man deeply. For no good reason, of course, but Lucius never needed many reasons to despise someone.

He hands Sirius a diary. "Grimmauld is Unplotabble, it's safer than Malfoy Manor," he says.

Sirius, still outraged and unbelieving Aurors now actually have the power to trespass into noble homes, doesn't pay attention immediately, takes the diary.

"I managed to sell most of my…collection to Borgin, but this one…" he trails off. "I considered planting it with one of the Weasley children, to be honest. That would show the idiot what it means to plot against me."

"Was this when you brawled like muggles?"

Sirius heard that Lucius apparently lost his mind and punched Arthur Weasley. In a library, of all places.

Harry, who witnessed it, as he was shopping with Draco and Lucius, was torn about it. He loves his uncle, but he felt bad because Ron also, presumably, loves his father.

"Indeed," Lucius' eye twitches. "I almost gave it to his daughter; however, I reconsidered. It's best to keep it safe, and you can actually keep it safe, here in Grimmauld."

Sirius can keep it safe in the Black Manor, too. It's where he stored all the dark artefacts everyone came to dump on him.

Black Manor isn't Unplotabble. Sirius simply told Scrimgeour that whoever dares to show up at his door, will die a most painful death.

"Are you threatening law enforcement, Black?"

Sirius stared at him. *"It's Mr Black,"* he said, softly. *"And, yes, I am."*

"I could have you arrested for saying that. I can have you arrested if you so much as touch a hair on an Auror's head."

"Arrest me, then," Sirius challenged.

He wasn't arrested.

Lucius and the others should also threaten people with death, only maybe they don't want the trouble. Maybe they don't think it will work, and it's easier to let the ministry get a small victory.

It works for Sirius. After he slaughtered the Roux family, everyone believes him when he's threatening death.

"What does it do, exactly?" Sirius asks, looking at the diary, flipping it open. It's blank, but Sirius feels the dark magic lingering around it.

"It would open the Chambers of Secrets, I was told."

Sirius freezes. His eyes snap up to meet Lucius'.

"*He* left it with me."

It's a Horcrux. *"I left clues with Lucius,"* Voldemort once said.

"You know what it is?" Sirius asks.

Lucius gives a sharp nod. "I wrote in it. It wrote back. With his handwriting." He swallows. "Not very many objects can think on their own. After I realised that, I buried it deep under the manor. But I can't risk them finding it, in case Aurors do dare show up to the manor."

Sirius turns the diary, and, engraved into the leather, in a corner-

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

(-)

"Hello," Sirius writes. "My name is Sirius Black."

He knows how to deal with a Horcrux, this time. He knows not to keep it on his person at all times, he knows to use Occlumency to stop it from influencing him.

"Hello, Sirius. My name is Tom."

It is his writing, excellent penmanship, tidy, cursive; Sirius recognises it immediately.

The diary is different. It can act on its own, without needing someone to posses or drain first. It doesn't need a body or a live brain to control.

It *writes back* and it's quite…incredible.

And it remembers Voldemort's calligraphy.

Lucius said he was told this diary can open the Chamber of Secrets, so it has a special purpose.

Oh, Sirius doesn't doubt it has the same fail-safe as the others- that its main goal will always be protecting Voldemort, that it *can* possess, but it has an extra directive.

How did he accomplish that? Sirius wonders, with a shiver.

"Are you a Hogwarts student?"

Sirius has a suspicion the Diary was Voldemort's first Horcrux. That he made it while at Hogwarts.

"I am," Sirius writes. "Sixth year," he adds, judging that was the age Voldemort must have made it, probably soon after he opened the Chamber and killed that little girl.

"Did you steal me from a fellow student, Sirius?"

It remembers Lucius writing in it!

"I did, yes. He bragged about having this notebook that can write back. I was curious. How is that possible?"

"I am a memory, preserved between these pages."

"Whose memory?"

"My own."

(-)

"A Black? I went to school with quite a number of them! Alphard, Walburga, Lucretia, Orion, Cygnus- are you related to them?"

"I'm Walburga's and Orion's son," Sirius writes.

He can feel the Horcrux trying to exert influence as it writes, to decipher if Sirius is telling the truth or not.

"Ah. Orion did seem to…hold Walburga in the highest of regard."

Sirius smiles. "You mean he was obsessed with her?"

"Quite. How interesting, that he got what he wanted. I wonder, is it a peaceful union?"

Sirius bites his lip. "No. They're at each other's throats all the time; sometimes they forget they have children."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Tom thinks he found a weak spot, so he pounces, drills Sirius about his home life, whenever Sirius writes in the diary.

"I think she hates me," Sirius once writes, trying to remember how he felt at sixteen. "She can't even look at me, but she loves my brother. I think she'd be happier if I would just disappear."

"And Orion? Does he hate you, too?"

"No. But If I'm not perfect, if I don't behave how he wants me to behave, then he becomes distant, ignores my letters. It's so hard to please him. It seems impossible."

"That must be difficult. I would…I wish I had some advice to give but I never had a father, so I don't know what to say."

"How come you didn't have a father?"

"I'm an orphan. I never knew my parents."

It's impressive, really, how well he can manipulate a conversation to bring it to where he wants. Tom thinks Sirius can relate to him, so he starts writing about his childhood, they both exchange sad things they are 'going through'.

(-)

Tom Riddle had a *fucked up* childhood. Sirius prays he's lying, that he's inventing most of it, but he doesn't thinks so.

It fits quite well with what he knew from Voldemort.

Tom speaks of the orphanage, of a woman named Miss Cole that Voldemort once mentioned; he even speaks of that Billy motherfucker that pushed his head through a window.

"Why did he do that?" Sirius ask, checking to see if Tom will answer differently then Voldemort.

He does, in a way.

"It's my fault." Voldemort would never have said that. *"I…I did something ugly, driven by anger. I'm not proud. I killed his poor rabbit."*

"That's not ugly," Sirius writes, hoping Tom will understand there's no need to pretend he's 'good' with Sirius. *"Sounds like that arsehole bullied you for some time. Fuck him, and fuck his rabbit."*

This Horcrux is a dark artefact, insanely dangerous if allowed to gain control; however, the memories it holds are of a sixteen year old boy.

An incredibly intelligent sixteen-year-old, cold and calculated, but Sirius is a man grown.

It's easy to manipulate him, so easy, to make Tom intrigued with him, to make him excited.

Tom falls for it, every day a little more. His penmanship grows less tidy as he hurries to write back to Sirius, no longer taking long pauses after every sentence Sirius writes.

His vocabulary grows less formal, his good-boy act dissipating with each encounter.

"I wish I could come to that orphanage of yours," Sirius says. "To teach those idiots that bother you a lesson."

"Oh, I taught them myself."

"You're too polite," Sirius says, with a smirk. "I'd kill them for daring to touch a wizard. Stupid muggles."

"Kill them? Come now, Sirius-"

"I would. I've killed before- well, almost. I tried to kill a classmate. I failed, but I can do it, if I want."

Tom is fascinated with the story; every part of it- the werewolf boy, the Animagi-

"What did this Severus do that you would send him to his death?"

"He annoyed me one too many times," Sirius writes. "He annoyed my best mate. But sadly James doesn't see it that way. He thinks I went too far. He's not speaking to me, right now. Remus isn't either. Dumbledore made such a scene, he'd have expelled me if I wasn't a Black. I feel very lonely, Tom. I sleep down in the dungeons, with your lot. It's cold here. Or maybe that's just me."

"You're not alone. You have me. You can talk to me. Your friends don't deserve you, if they abandoned you so quickly."

A pause, as the previous words disappear.

"I never had a friend," the ink spells, slowly. *"But if I had one, I wouldn't turn my back on them."*

"You never had a friend? Merlin, that's…I'm sorry, Tom. You must be lonely, too."

An even longer pause. *"Sometimes. I-"* But then the 'I' disappears, Tom changing its mind.

"There was this veteran, I suppose. When I was a child. I don't think he was a friend, but he was the closest thing I had. He taught me how to play poker."

"Poker?" Sirius asks, and it's good that he is always using Occlumency when writing to Tom, because it helps keep his mind in order, it lessens the pain he always feels when he thinks of Voldemort's childhood.

"It's a muggle card game. I can teach you?"

"Yes, please. I'd like to learn."

"Alright, so, the first rule…"

(-)

"Do you look like your family, Sirius? I'd like to have a face to associate with you."

"Yes. I look like my father. And you?"

"Nothing special, not like the Blacks. Regular brown hair, brown eyes."

What a liar. But this lie is…strange. Does he really think there's nothing 'special' about how he looks? *Regular* hair? That thick, glossy hair Sirius remembers from the picture, from his dreams with the ring?

And the eyes? The most beautiful eyes in the world?

"I'm quite tall, but I wish I wasn't. It's harder to blend in, sneak around, when you're a head taller than most others."

"I'm tall, too. I like it," Sirius writes. "I like standing out. I always loved attention. Why would you want to blend in, Tom? You're so smart, you don't deserve to be lumped in with the idiots."

"It's safer if you hide in the shadows, unnoticed. You never know who is watching."

(-)

They speak of what Tom cherishes most; the Dark Arts. It's hard to make him admit it, but Sirius manages.

They talk of rare curses, magical theories, and Tom gets so incredibly excited, writes pages with incredible speed, detailing the best wand movements, the best incantations, how even inflections in one's tone can make a difference.

Sirius barely keeps up with him- how on earth is it possible for a teenager to know so much?! When did he find the time to study all this in just the five years of leaning he's a wizard?

Sirius teaches Tom curses he learned from Voldemort. It blows Tom's mind.

Yes, yes, you're very smart, Sirius thinks, amused, because it's funny to see Tom in awe with spells invented by his older self.

"What do you want to do after Hogwarts?" Sirius asks.

"I'd like to travel, see the world and all it has to offer. I'll have to work first, I suppose, to get funds. I don't have a knut to my name."

"I can check, if you want. What became of you. I've never heard your name, though. I think it's possible you just settled somewhere outside Britain."

"Yes, if you could check, I'd like to know."

"Might take a while, though," Sirius writes. "Since you said you're a half-blood…there's a war brewing inside the country. A dark lord and his followers that make it difficult for those with impure blood. In case you're in hiding or something, I wouldn't want to expose your older self, wherever he might be-"

Tom cuts over him, makes his words vanish, replaced with his own.

"What dark lord? Grindelwald?"

"No, Dumbledore wiped the floor with him some half a century ago. This one is called Lord Voldemort."

That *delights* Tom. Even with Occlumency, Sirius feels a spark of pure joy traveling up his spine.

Tom pesters Sirius about it, every time Sirius writes. He thinks he's being subtle, and perhaps if Sirius would have been sixteen…as it is, it's not very subtle.

"Will you join him? When you're done with school, I mean?"

Sirius bites his cheek. "I don't know. I told you he's powerful, and everyone of worth is on his side, seems like, but I don't think like he does- I don't think half-bloods or muggleborns are stupid animals."

"Perhaps he's just saying that to gain support from the blood purist families. It's what I'd do, if I wanted to start a war. It's what Grindelwald does- or I suppose, did- as well."

(-)

The more Tom trusts him, the more painful his questions become.

Not of what is going on in the world, or new inventions in the magical field. No.

Tom asks, *"what is it like, to celebrate Yule? Or Beltane? I read about it, but I heard rumours every family has their own ways of celebrating. How do you do it?"*

Sirius tells him, then makes the mistake of asking what, exactly, one does for Christmas, besides hanging things in a tree.

Tom sends him a long-winded and detailed explanation of the muggle customs, of Church sermons, and fasting, of Christmas Eve, and the opening of the presents, grand dinners with the family. *"Of course, I never got to truly experience it, but that's what it's like in books. They made us a special dinner at Wool's, if Cole had enough money, I suppose, and some wealthy people would donate small presents for us."*

He really did have a horrible childhood. The memory in the diary seems more aware of it than Voldemort had been; seems more *angry* about it, too.

"I might have a lead on my mother's family. I'll go see them this summer."

A small break.

"Or I suppose I won't be going anywhere, will I? I forget, sometimes, that time passed outside this diary."

(-)

"You should join Lord Voldemort," Tom encourages. *"And perhaps give him this diary. He might find it interesting, the way I was made."*

"How were you made?"

"I forgot, too much time has passed," Tom lies. But it's a bad lie. Sirius can tell when he's lying, judging by how fast or slow he writes. *"But I know it was dark magic. Perhaps he could figure it out. You said he is powerful and all-knowing."*

(-)

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Sirius asks.

“No. I told you, I never had a friend.”

“Not a friend…a girl you fancy.”

“No.” The answer comes so fast, when most teenagers would avoid that question. *“Do you?”*

“I had a couple,” Sirius writes. “I had a boyfriend, too,” he adds, cringing at calling Voldemort a boyfriend.

No answer comes.

“Tom?”

The diary stays silent for days.

(-)

“Is that normal in your time?” Tom finally answers, after a few nights where Sirius wrote his name to no success. *“Being involved with the same sex?”*

Sirius used to worry over what Lily would think of Sirius fancying men, but somehow he never truly considered what Voldemort, also raised with muggles, thought of it.

Obviously, he was fine with it by the time he met Sirius, yet he never really questioned what venom Voldemort heard about it from the muggles, especially in that time, when everyone agrees the vitriol was far worse than Sirius’ own time.

“Not in the muggle world,” Sirius writes. Though he did hear the muggles are getting quite progressive these days, far more than they’ve been in the seventies. “Here, in the magical world, it’s as it always was. Frowned upon, but manageable enough, under certain conditions.”

“It’s wrong,” Tom writes, and Sirius just stares at the words for a minute.

Voldemort never used words like ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. *Ever.*

“Why?”

"It just is."

"You sound like my mother." Though, no, not really. His mother made a scene, because Sirius was heir to the family. She had a reason, she didn't think 'it's just wrong'.

"I doubt that; Walburga seems fine with Alphard and his deviancy. She covers for him, keeps his secrets."

(-)

They talk of other things, for the following nights. Sirius tries his best to return to that topic, so very curious, but Tom is determined to avoid it.

Now it makes sense, *finally*, how Voldemort was a virgin when Sirius met him.

He finds a way to bring up that Dumbledore was with Grindelwald, pretends he just heard the rumour.

Tom *refuses* to believe it. *"Dumbledore is many things, but he's not* ***that****. No, he'd never do that sort of thing."*

Sirius has some experience with being conflicted with his attraction to men, but it was always just that- *conflicted*. He never denied it, never so vehement against it as Tom is.

It bothers him. Immensely. It's so *different* from Voldemort, who always took what he wanted, who showed pride in everything he did, who never questioned himself.

To see such clear evidence of self-hate... it's painful. Sirius wants to change it, but it's stupid. Tom - it's not even Tom, it's a memory in a book, one that just thinks it's a boy. It's a dark artefact, but Sirius feels *so sorry* for him.

Feels *worse* for Voldemort, who was real, who felt this, wrote about it in his diary

When did he get over it? Did he ever?

(-)

It's Tom that comes back to the subject, after a few more days.

"Who is he?" he asks, out of the blue, in the middle of a conversation about muggle music. *"This…boy you mentioned."*

“He isn’t a boy,” Sirius writes, because if describing Voldemort as a boyfriend was so odd, referring to him as a boy is incomprehensible. “He’s older than me.”

The page remains blank for some minutes. Sirius stares at it, and is almost about to close it, accept Tom has retreated again, when the writing comes.

“Stay away from him.”

“Why?”

Another long break. Sirius can hear his heartbeat in his ears.

“He will hurt you.”

A shiver goes down his spine, a feeling of doom. It’s Sirius that closes the diary, abandons the conversation for the first time.

(-)

“How long have I been with you?” Tom asks. *“It’s impossible for me to tell.”*

“Almost two months.”

“Are you getting close to the summer holiday?”

“Yes. It’s May,” Sirius lies. In reality, it’s August.

“Have you thought more about joining Voldemort?” Before Sirius can answer, Tom goes on. *“I know you’re too young for war, but I think you should at least try to meet him. To give him the diary.”*

“Why are you so invested in this?”

Sirius waits for a long time for the answer.

“I don’t like it here. It’s dark when you don’t write to me. It isn’t…pleasant.”

Fuck.

Don’t feel sorry for it. It’s not a person, Sirius reminds himself, but it’s hard, *so hard,* because Tom believes he is a person. It’s different from the ring.

This one has *memories*; memories written by Voldemort; it was given enough autonomy to act on its own, to open the Chamber.

Sirius feels Tom keeps trying to reach out to Sirius, whenever they write to each other, but he can’t, because of Sirius’ Occlumency, because Sirius knows to never linger too long around

the diary.

Yet Tom isn't trying to bring up the Chamber; ever since Sirius mentioned Voldemort, all it wants is to be brought to him.

In this, he is alike the Ring. But the reasons and methods are different.

"And you think Voldemort would help you? Why? He isn't known for acts of charity."

"I just think he'd be interested in someone like me," Tom insists. *"And in someone like you. You know so much of the Arts, even at your age. That's quite remarkable. And you're… different. A Black, that doesn't hate muggleborns or half-bloods. A Gryffindor that is willing to grow close to a Slytherin."*

"The hat wanted me in Slytherin," Sirius writes. Voldemort is the only person alive that knows this, now that Peter died.

"I can see why; you are ambitious, and so prideful. But I think Gryffindor suits you well. You strike me as a brave one, Sirius. And reckless enough to delve so deeply into the Arts; to speak to someone who doesn't have a brain or a way to breathe."

Because the Diary can't posses Sirius, can't reach into his mind…it is forced to connect with Sirius in a normal way.

Can it really connect with someone? This piece of dark magic?

"Why did you say that man I talked of would hurt me?" Sirius asks, and then he holds his breath, that feeling of doom coming back.

He knows, deep down, that he will not like the answer.

"From experience," Tom writes, and the anxiety intensifies, Sirius breaks into a cold sweat.

Tom says nothing else, and Sirius just stares at the yellowed pages, heart in his throat, fingers shaking on the quill. When he dips it into ink, several drops fall onto the page, get absorbed, seamlessly.

"Did a man hurt you, Tom? An older man?"

"Yes."

Sirius breathes out, tries to swallow past the knot in his throat. His thoughts coalesce into a theory, giving a direction to that sense of doom he felt ever since Tom gave his warning, weeks before.

A tear falls on the page; it gets absorbed just as fast as the ink. Only the tear is from Sirius; it comes from his body, it represents an *emotion*, and the diary glows a little, because it fuels the Horcrux, it's the first emotion it can draw from Sirius.

“When you were younger?” Sirius writes. “Much younger?” Because no muggle would be able to hurt Tom once he got a wand.

“Yes.”

More tears fall, mix with ink. “Was it the veteran?”

Sirius heard stories about muggles like that. His mother used to threaten him with them, when Sirius would sneak out of the house to go and play with muggles at the park. *“Do you know what they do to lost children, these muggle animals?”* she’d yell at him. Horrible stories that shouldn’t even exist in the darkest fiction. Crimes committed against vulnerable children, crimes so heinous not even the evilest of hags would consider.

For a long time, Sirius thought his mother was just saying that to scare him, but he later found out it can happen. It does happen.

So many muggle children end up alone on the streets, discarded, too many of them, in their huge world, with vast settlements, nothing like the tight-knit community wizards have, where everyone is accounted for, everyone has some relatives to watch out for them. A society that can access someone’s memories, or rip the truth out with a potion. A place where a child’s word can be proven true, no matter their age, unlike in the muggle one.

“No,” Tom writes. *“He was a good man; the only good man I ever met.”*

‘A thief’, Voldemort said, *fondly*, when he talked of the veteran. ‘A drunk.’

“Then who?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tom writes. *“It’s in the past. Just know it’s not wise to trust older men. Not until you’re strong enough to defend yourself, at least.”*

“It matters to me,” Sirius writes. “Please, tell me.”

“Why does it matter to you? I can feel your distress, Sirius. Are you crying?”

“If you tell me, I will take you to Voldemort,” Sirius writes, desperate.

Tom takes time to consider it.

Sirius wipes his tears with his sleeve, but more tears come.

“I suppose it wouldn’t matter. He must be dead by now, surely. I must have killed him, after I left Hogwarts. I’m sure I did.”

And then he writes a name and an address.

(-)

Sirius finds the church, finds a man dressed in a robe. *A priest,* he remembers, from Lily's wedding.

"While most muggles do not believe in magic, would rather tell themselves they are too tired and simply imagining things, that's not the Church. Oh, they believe," Voldemort says.

His eyes flash, dangerously.

"They tried to have me exorcised."

When Sirius starts asking questions about the man Tom named, the priest accuses Sirius of being a journalist, tells him to let the past rest, hasn't enough harm been done?

So Sirius draws him into a private chamber, away from the few churchgoers, and uses Legilimency.

This priest wasn't there when it all happened, he was too young for that, but he knows the story of the previous priest. *'Father'.* Apparently, that's the appellative used for these muggle men dressed in black robes, but what Sirius learns is the furthest thing from how a father should act.

The mind he's ravaging, none too gently, searching for information he doesn't truly want to learn, but needing to learn it, anyway, doesn't know all the details, but Sirius learns the police were involved.

And he knows police keep records, just like Aurors.

Only, unlike Aurors, these police people don't have only one headquarters. There's so many police stations, so, *so* many, and it takes Sirius over a week- and several charms and curses- to find the right place, the right people, the right questions, before he finally gets his hands on a file.

There were several victims, all residing at Wool's orphanage, located right across the street from the church. All boys, raging from seven to eleven years old.

Tom's name isn't amongst them. Notes from an investigator suggest there were many more victims, but that they simply never came forward, held back by fear or shame.

Apparently, Sirius deduces, these men in robes hold great power and sway in the muggle word, what with them representing God.

The priest fled during the investigation, that was lengthy because the children refused to speak to the police for the longest time.

Sirius cannot bear reading too much of the crimes committed against them; he simply *can't*, his stomach rolling with disgust and rage.

He'd killed people, he once decapitated someone, but this- this is too *sick*.

The case was closed almost fifteen years later, when the priest was found dead, up in some remote northern village.

‘Tortured with surgical precision’, Sirius read. Torture wasn’t what killed the man, however. No. Despite the gruesome wounds, it was a snakebite that was the official cause of death. On his neck. An expert opinionated it resembled a king cobra’s bite, though how such a reptile would find itself in the United Kingdom, in winter, in the middle of nowhere, apparently remained a mystery.

You got him, Tom, Sirius thinks. *You got him.*

(-)

Sirius sits on the pavement in front of the police station, because his knees refuse to function.

He buries his head between his knees, trying to breathe, using all his energy to stop himself from throwing up.

There was a photograph in the file- grainy, white and black, of a very poor quality. The notes said it had been taken when a Minister visited the orphanage during the Great Depression, whatever that meant.

As always, the stillness of it is jarring, as all muggle photographs are. But this one- this one was worse.

The Minister, dressed elegantly, standing beside a woman (the Matron, notes said), a child on her hip.

Arranged around them, in a dilapidated, soulless room, many children stood, with blank faces, all dressed the same, all wearing the same expression, or *lack* of it.

In their faces, Sirius saw the Azkaban inmates staring back from behind bars as Sirius walked past them. The same hopeless *nothing*.

They were all shaved, and Sirius wondered if that was a cruel punishment, or maybe it was to stave off lice.

Bald, extremely thin, poorly dressed children, dead inside before they ever got a chance at living.

Except one, stood to the side, hair perfectly arranged, parted, with a slight curl, a book held tightly at his chest, like a shield.

Did they think him demonic for that, too? Were they afraid of little Tom because they couldn’t shave his hair? Was he punished for it? Did that horrible woman send him to the priest, to cure him, make him ‘normal’, expel the demons out of him?

There were demons, Sirius understands, but not inside Tom. There were demons all around him, and he was helpless to defend himself, to stop them from hurting him.

Sirius wishes there was a way to travel back in time, that Time Turners would take one back for more than a handful of hours.

He wants to go back in time and take Tom out of there, with his little book, and his skinny limbs. He wants to care for him, protect him, love him, spoil him, give him everything he deserves.

He can't, and it's devastating. It's all the more devastating that he was Orion's age, Marvolo's age, and Sirius feels a new type of dread and all-encompassing *fury* just imagining someone ever touching his boys.

The pavement cracks around him, and a pole falls down, flattens a couple of cars in the distance.

People scream all around him, but he doesn't move. *Let them scream*, he thinks. *Let them die.* All of them, the whole wretched species, the fucking monsters that allow men like the priest to exist amongst them, to hurt little children in that manner.

Let them and their useless god, that saw such horrors happen in his place of worship and did nothing- let them perish in agony.

Sirius stands, forces himself to walk away, before he kills them all, before he unleashes the Great Fire upon London and lets it devour the entire city.

He's going to bring Voldemort back. He can't do anything for Tom, but he can be there for Voldemort.

His resolve doesn't bulge, not even when he gets home and sees Marvolo and Orion chase each other up and down the stairs.

His resolve only grows stronger, because this is how children should be. Safe, with bright eyes and loud laughter, knowing nothing could harm them, that whatever trouble they encounter, they can just ask for a parent that will be there to save them.

Sirius makes his way to Helix, hoping for that soothing, comforting balm his baby boy always is.

He finds him with Astrid; she takes one look at his face, and her own fills with concern. She doesn't protest when, wordlessly, Sirius takes Helix from her, and walks away.

He goes to his room, and gets into bed, holding Helix to his chest.

Only then does he cry.

He has never cried around his children, at least not when they were awake to witness it.

He kisses Helix' forehead, gently runs his fingers down his back, and tries to calm himself.

“No,” Helix says, frowning at Sirius. “No, Daddy, no crying!” He squirms until he puts his little hands on Sirius’ cheeks. “Happy,” he orders. “Daddy is happy.” Helix kisses him on his nose. “There! All better!”

It only makes Sirius cry harder. “I love you so much,” he tells Helix.

He does. He loves all his sons.

But he has to bring Voldemort back. His sons aren’t orphans, Sirius can protect them, and even if Sirius dies, there’s so many people that can protect the boys in his absence. There’s his mum, Bella, Astrid, Regulus, grandparents in Norway, the fucking Russian Emperor.

They’re safe.

Voldemort isn’t. He was never safe.

Sirius has to help him.

“I love you,” Helix offers, readily. He smiles, and his little hands land on Sirius’ lips. “I love you,” he repeats. “No crying, Daddy. Smile!”

And Sirius does smile through the tears. He calms down, the pain lessens, if only slightly.

“Yes!” Helix nods. “Yes, Daddy! Good!” He throws his arms around Sirius’ neck and snuggles closer.

(-)

“He’s dead. You got him,” Sirius writes. “The muggles were baffled, because it was achieved by magical means.”

Tom says nothing.

“I’ll take you to Voldemort. It won’t be much longer now; you’ll be with him, I promise.”

“Good.” Tom’s neat writing shows up. And then, after another handful of seconds:

“I am Lord Voldemort.”

Sirius closes his eyes, so he won’t cry over the pages again. He takes a steading breath.

“It’s an anagram of my name,” Tom carries on.

“I came up with it at sixteen,” Voldemort once told him.

“I figured,” Sirius writes.

"I should hope so; I wasn't being very subtle. Tell him to write to me. I want to speak to him."

"I will," Sirius lies.

He would *never.* Sirius doesn't want Voldemort learning of these conversations.

Even if he told him to write into his diary, Voldemort won't listen, he knows. Voldemort never listens to anyone. He has no sympathy for his Horcruxes.

And he shouldn't; they're not people. It's only Sirius that can't help but consider them as such.

"I won't let you down," Sirius writes. "I'll get you to him, I swear it. Thank you for trusting me."

"You're different," Tom writes.

"In what way?"

"You're the only one that wanted to help me."

"No one ever stood up for me," Voldemort whispered in his ear, in Norway.

Sirius closes the diary.

(-)

"What in the hells!?" Barty shoots up from his bed, when he wakes to find Sirius shaking him.

"He's in Albania," Sirius says.

Barty freezes, in his sleeping robe, staring at Sirius.

"Who," he asks, quietly, but he knows already, going by the way his voice fills with so much devotion it's evident in one single word.

Sirius empties his pockets of whatever muggle money he had on his person. He throws the notes on the bed.

"You'll have to take a muggle boat to cross the Channel. You'll find one of those in Dover," he instructs. He knows Barty has never traveled by muggle means.

For a second, Sirius doubts himself. Barty was a boy when he was locked up, he didn't get to experience much of the world, especially muggle type-

Voldemort said Barty is smart, Sirius reminds himself.

Barty is still frozen, watches him with hope and suspicion.

“Why are you doing this? What are you planning? After you locked me here, poisoned Regulus against him-”

“He’s in a forest there, somewhere, in Albania. When you find him, tell him I have his-” Sirius’ voice breaks. He turns his back to Barty, blinks away the tears. “I have his body. It’s in Grimmauld. If he wants to go that route with the resurrection ritual, he’ll have to come to Grimmauld.”

“It’s a trap,” Barty hisses, paranoid. Not that he doesn’t have reasons for paranoia, after all he’s been through.“Must be a trap-”

“Even if he chooses a new body, tell him it’s in his best interest to contact me as soon as he’s back. For his own safety.”

“As if you’d-”

“Leave. Now. Before I change my mind.”

Barty *runs*. He doesn’t even take the money, doesn’t grab a robe, or shoes. He runs straight out of the house, and Sirius watches from the window as he bolts across the gardens.

A decade after he died, Voldemort still inspires people to do crazy things for him, like running around shoeless, without a wand, from Britain to Eastern Europe, filled only with devotion.

(-)

“I need the Horcrux,” Sirius tells Bella. “The one he left with you-”

“No.”

She glares at him, eyes hard, arms crossed. She’s aware she can’t really stop Sirius. But she can make it difficult for him.

He has the right to enter her vault, but fuck knows what the Horcrux is, and he can’t even search by checking dark artefacts, because there must be at least a hundred very dark artefacts in the Lestrange vault.

Sirius goes to stand before her, tries taking her hand, but she’d crossed them so efficiently over her chest.

“I’m bringing him back,” he whispers.

For a second, she doesn't react, probably not processing his words-

And then her entire face lights up, her eyes shine, eerily like Barty's had, and she's the one that grabs him, long fingernails digging into his shoulders.

"Let me come! I want to help-"

"I sent Barty."

She blinks. "Barty? Crouch? He's in Azkaban!"

"It's a long story; his father broke him out, like ten years ago. Regulus found him at some point, so we took him back and held him in one of our properties."

She stares at him in shock. For a second, she looks angry, but she's far too happy about Voldemort to care much; however she still mutters, "so *you* kept him prisoner, instead of the Dementors or his father."

Sirius shrugs. "He's free now. I sent him to Voldemort. It's going to take a while, weeks, most likely-"

"Why? Where is my lord?"

"What is the Horcrux?"

She sighs. "Why do you need it?"

He needs it because he doesn't want Voldemort to be scared. He wants him to have all his Horcruxes when he gets back into his body. Well, at least the ones Sirius can get his hands on.

Or, in case Voldemort chooses not to come to Sirius to get his body, then Sirius needs all the Horcruxes to get Voldemort into agreeing for a meeting, so Sirius can tell him about Harry, hand him his Horcruxes, and hope the man will listen.

"I need it," Sirius says. "You'll have to trust me. Bella, I'm bringing him back. I need it for his own good."

She searches his face for some seconds, before she sighs again. "It's Helga's Cup."

Of course it is. Sirius suspected that one ended up a Horcrux as well, since Voldemort stole it together with the locket from Hepzibah Smith.

Voldemort really wasn't subtle, was he?

It's easy to get the Cup. The goblins take him to the deepest levels of Gringotts, where the biggest vaults are; Sirius hasn't been in some years. He uses the gold his father left him, and now his grandfather, or what he makes himself. He listened to Regulus, and didn't touch a single coin from the Black family vault, only visited to get some papers and to show the vault to Orion.

It's on the same level with the Lestrange one. Sirius walks past the Black vault, following the goblins, waits for them to tame the dragon, and remove all the curses from the vault, so Sirius can safely enter it, without setting off the security measures.

He wanders around for almost half an hour, in between mountains of gold, searching, until he spots the cup, hidden on a middle shelf, between ancient Lestrange cups, but a tad taller than the rest.

He grabs it, puts it in a box, and then retrieves a necklace Bellatrix asked Sirius to get.

Rodolphus' wedding gift to her; a dazzling thing, so bright it almost blinds Sirius when the light from the candles falls on it; so precious and expensive Bella didn't even keep it in her Manor, always sent it back to the vault after she wore it for some special event or another.

He didn't ask if she wants to wear this to celebrate Voldemort's return, or perhaps she wants to wear it for her husband, when he'll be set free.

When he goes to give her the necklace, he finds her where he sent her, in Black Manor.

She's lounged on a chaise, in the garden, under an umbrella, sipping at cold pumpkin juice, watching Kreacher digging around.

Kreacher is muttering to himself, "why would mistress bury a ring in the garden, Kreacher doesn't know. She could have asked Kreacher to keep it safe."

"Can't you just check for dark magic-" Sirius starts to ask, lifting Bella, so he can sit, and then placing her in his lap. She offers him her pumpkin juice, but he declines.

"Oh, Master is so *smart*, and Kreacher is so stupid! How could Kreacher not think of that!" the elf snaps.

Bella giggles. "He did check." She gestures to a pile of odd objects laying close by. "Apparently many dark artefacts were buried here. One almost killed Kreacher! He was lucky I was here."

"Oh, yes, Kreacher is so lucky," Kreacher mutters, up to his knees in dirt, flecks of mud on his ears, rose thorns stuck in his back.

"If you want, you can go back home and I'll ask Dobby to help," Sirius drawls.

Kreacher glowers at him, holding his shovel like a sword. "That useless thing! Master thinks Dobby can do a better job than Kreacher!?"

"No," Sirius answer. "But he can do it without bitching at me, I'm certain."

Bella slaps his shoulder. "Don't be mean!"

Kreacher keeps his muttering to a minimum after that, and it only takes some twenty more minutes before he finds the box with the ring.

“Rest,” Sirius tells him. “Send Dobby to clean the mess.”

And it is a mess, roses and mounds of dirt everywhere-

“So Dobby can ruin the rose garden!? NO! Master takes his ring, takes Mistress Bella and leaves Kreacher in peace to make order!”

Kreacher is lucky Sirius doesn’t want to kill him anymore. Otherwise….unthinkable, to be sent away from his own garden, by his house elf.

But Kreacher looks so mad at them, that they decide to fuck off.

(-)

He breathes harshly, lungs seizing with pleasure, and he rests his head on Voldemort, in that special place between shoulder and neck that seems made to accommodate Sirius’ face. It’s more comfortable than any silk covered pillow, gives him more rest and respite than any bed he’s ever been into.

Voldemort’s fingers trail up and down his back, yet even if the touch is feather-light, Sirius had never felt so …held in his life. So securely anchored.

He draws back, only slightly, breath coming easier to him, even if the pleasure doesn’t truly recede; it never does, with Voldemort. Sirius looks down at him, at that ethereal face, with gaunt like features, made god-like with the blend of tarnished, burnt out beauty, sharp, angular bones, power and intelligence beyond limits shining from his unique eyes.

“Are you afraid of me, Sirius?” he asks.

Sirius stands from his bed, walks to his window. He hadn’t had a good night of rest in quite some time. He slept poorly since ‘81, but in the last couple of weeks it’s almost as bad as in the beginning.

Will he be afraid of me when he returns? Sirius wonders. *Will he see me as a threat?*

He looks to the stars, beyond them, searches-

He breathes in. Voldemort is no longer in Albania. Sirius retreats back to his bedroom. He doesn’t want to look closely- he doesn’t want to see the state he is in, or if he’s possessing Barty, or what the fuck they’re doing.

Voldemort is making his way north.

(-)

Before he met Sirius, before he *trusted* Sirius and taught him, Voldemort taught Bella the ritual for resurrecting him and restoring him to his body.

So Sirius practices with her. He wants to make sure he remembers it right, that he can do it flawlessly.

Even just the practice *drains* him; it's a complicated ritual, and to make it more complicated, it's in old Norse.

"Perhaps you should ask your little wife to help you," Bella cackles, as they go over pronunciation.

Sirius can barely look at Astrid these days without guilt overwhelming him. She asked him, twice, if he's alright.

Sirius only gets more anxious by the day. Especially when he sees Harry.

He knows he just upheaved all their lives; they will be safe, he will make sure, but everyone's life will change when Voldemort gets back.

In September, he sends Harry to Hogwarts; he personally checked the newest Defence teacher; Sirius already knew Lockhart, a man a few years older than Sirius, and his competitor for 'brightest smile award'; Witch Weekly keeps alternating between Sirius and Lockhart, at any given month.

There's nothing strange going on with the man. He's strangely incompetent, but certainly not in cahoots with Voldemort.

"No one else applied for the position," Dumbledore explained, when Sirius, and other Governors, asked why he'd hire such a con artist.

Regis and Regina made their way to Hogwarts, too. Regina ended up in Slytherin, and Regis went to Ravenclaw.

Viviene, Mary's older daughter is now in Gryffindor, with Harry, who promised he'll look after her.

Sirius sends Astrid and his sons to Norway; in case everything goes to hell, they will be safe there.

He sends his mum and grandmother Irma to live with Regulus and Isadora at his home in Scotland; no one is happy with that decision, but they all obey him.

Regulus gets angry Sirius won't tell him why he needs Grimmauld empty for.

Bella accepts to stay away, too. She understands Sirius wants a moment alone with Voldemort, after so many years.

And then, Sirius waits.

(-)

The doorbell rings, shortly after midnight on the fifth day of October. It hasn't rung in many years; most of Sirius' guests come through the fireplace, or without knocking on the door, since he previously allowed them through the wards.

Sirius flinches, stands, and then freezes in place.

This is it.

Last he checked- the previous night- Barty and Voldemort were in France. It's them.

It takes him a minute to remember how to walk, and then he's bolting through the house, heart hammering, feeling too hot and too cold, all at once.

When he reaches the door, he stops again, rests his head against the wood.

Voldemort is just on the other side, and it feels like a dream.

Everything feels unreal.

Sirius thought he had prepared himself, had been waiting for this for months- really, *years,* but in the last months he *knew* it would happen. Yet he's not prepared.

He's especially afraid of whatever shape Voldemort will have.

He breathes in, one more time, straightens his shoulders, and opens the door.

There's no one there.

Sirius blinks, crushing disappointment washing over him. *Did I imagine the doorbell?*

A hissing sound reaches him, and he looks down-

A great snake is coiled on the doorstep. As soon as their eyes meet, he knows it's Voldemort.

He knows, because his knees feel weak, all of a sudden; blood rushes to his head, and his chest grows so tight, it's painful.

He expected Barty and a monstrous shape, a golem, maybe just a shadow with him, maybe a possessed Barty- he imagined many, many things, but not this.

The eyes, slitted, without lids, are red. And intelligent, fixed on Sirius with an intensity he recognises, he'd recognise *everywhere*, no matter in what form.

What can he say, after all this time?

I missed you, it's the first thing that comes to mind.

He feels twenty all over again. He wonders if he'll ever feel differently; if he'd have stood before Voldemort in thirty years time, in fifty, if he'll always feel this small around him.

"Come in," he says, after gods know how long they've been standing there. At least his voice isn't shaking.

The snake is *massive*. At least twelve feet, and thicker than a man's thigh.

It slithers with purpose, coils tightening, a dark green. It stops, suddenly, inches from the doorstep. Hisses.

The wards flare, a sharp pain in Sirius' head. *It's fine*, he thinks, but the wards do not agree.

It's because they sense the deceit- that the snake is not what it appears.

"The wards," he says, though just by meeting those eyes again he is aware Voldemort knows already what the problem is. "They're…prickly." And old. Ancient. Sentient.

Sometimes Sirius wonders how much Blacks own Grimmauld, and how much Grimmauld owns them.

Voldemort comes to a stop in front of him, rising, rising, until he's looming over Sirius.

It's huge. Sirius spares a hope no muggle is seeing this.

"It would be easier if I-" Sirius stops. Swallows. "If you cross the threshold with me. They'll accept you, then."

Though he can't imagine carrying Voldemort inside. Is he supposed to just …scoop him up? How does one carry a snake this big? How on earth did Barty transport him?

Voldemort doesn't move.

He doesn't trust me.

Why would he? After all this time, knowing Sirius has Harry, raised him, protected him-

Voldemort doesn't have any reason to trust him, and Sirius would rather have had a conversation with him when Voldemort can *speak* back, but he'll have to have it like this, and he opens his mouth again-

The snake does move. The head, to be specific, slowly, mouth open, huge fangs glistening, tongue flickering out.

Sirius stays still; and not because of the venom filled fangs so close to his face, but because *Voldemort* is close to him.

He can hear his heart in his ears. *Thud-thud-thud.*

When they touch, it does feel like Voldemort, even if so much colder.

He is touching Sirius' left arm, sleeves rolled up, and the magic inside the mark flares, for the first time in so long.

Slowly, Voldemort wraps itself around Sirius' wrist, then up his arm, over his shoulder, across his back, twists around his torso, coils tightening, until all twelve feet of him are off the ground.

He's heavy, but he distributes his weight in such a way that it doesn't affect Sirius' balance.

His dark mark *burns*, and when Sirius looks at his arm, the lines are clearer than before; not black as they used to be, rather a faded grey, from what Sirius can glimpse under the tail wrapped around his wrist.

Voldemort does nothing, his head now somewhere around Sirius' upper left ribs.

Sirius turns around, carefully, and takes a single step back inside Grimmauld.

The wards flare again, but settle in a second, and Sirius closes the door behind him.

Voldemort gets off him, fast. Somehow, he does this quietly and elegantly, even if he's so big.

"It's- downstairs." He's *upset* Voldemort got off him so fast, as if not standing to be in contact with him-

Merlin, you might feel twenty, but you're thirty. Stop.

"Follow me," he says, starts walking towards the kitchen.

It's hard turning his back to Voldemort; an instinct that warns him that's a bad idea.

Sirius hasn't been in the presence of someone that could have power over him since-

Since he last saw Voldemort.

It's jarring. Sirius is a powerful man, feared, and respected, wilding influence; he's become used to feeling untouchable.

But that crumbles to dust around Voldemort, and he's just a snake at the moment.

Are you really going to give him a body? A wand?

Yes, Sirius thinks, determined, shoving the thought aside.

He simply forgot how it felt to share air with someone of Voldemort's power.

I should have hung out with Dumbledore more, he chides himself. But Dumbledore's power was never this….was never like *this*. Not so obvious, never so oppressive or malignant.

When he reaches the secret wall, he places his hand on the stones and they slide to let him pass, Voldemort slithering after him.

The snake freezes as soon as he sees….his own body.

How odd that must be.

Hood extended, he becomes tall once more, rising, coils gleaming in the flames the candles Sirius lit throw all over the small room.

The red eyes are fixed on his body.

And then, he seems to take in the Horcruxes.

All of them, except the one in Hogwarts.

He hisses, turns to Sirius, eyes blazing.

"To keep them safe," Sirius says, though already he can tell he misjudged this, that seeing the Horcruxes won't appease Voldemort at all; that instead of making him feel safe that he has them, it will make him paranoid.

Well, no sense in regretting it now.

"Shall we?" he asks.

He already drew the runes all around Voldemort's body, now elevated on a table.

There's only two more missing, and then they'll activate and the ritual will start.

Voldemort turns to inspect the runes, moving between them with great care not to touch the blood. He checks each and every one, all thirty-one of them.

All made with Sirius' blood, the sacrifice of an ardent disciple, of someone that has faith in the person intended to be resurrected by the ritual.

It won't work, otherwise.

Bella gently suggested Sirius should use her blood, but he denied her.

He *does* have faith in Voldemort.

He can't tell how long the inspection lasts; Sirius is mesmerised, just watching him. Even as a snake. It's *him*, and he's there, and Sirius cannot look away.

Finally, Voldemort climbs on the table, twisting and turning around the metal legs, until he's over his own body, covering it.

And then he starts flinging the Horcruxes away.

The first is the goblet; it lands with a thud, outside the runic circle. Then the tail encircles the diary, throws it in a different corner.

“It won’t affect them,” Sirius says. “It shouldn’t, at least.”

Both he and Bella wondered if, by doing the ritual with the Horcruxes inside the runic circle, the body will absorb the magic of the Horcruxes, along with Voldemort.

They decided it wouldn’t, since the containers are protected with their own dark rituals, that won’t allow Voldemort’s magic trapped inside them to escape, by any means.

Voldemort clearly doesn’t believe him, because the locket comes next.

Sirius winces when the golden chain snaps, as Voldemort pulls it, and then the locket lands close to the diary.

The ring is the worst; Voldemort twists until he’s staring at his own dead hand, where the ring is snug around one of his fingers.

His fangs glint in the light, as he prepares to move.

“I’ll take it off,” Sirius says, because he doesn’t want to-

He stops when Voldemort turns to him, jaws opened wide, hissing ominously.

Is he protective of the ring or of his dead body? Which one of those is he afraid of Sirius handling?

I’ve had them for over a decade, Sirius thinks. *I’ve had your body, and your ring, and no harm came to either.*

But he says nothing, and Voldemort carefully manipulates the dead hand, until he can use his mouth and his fangs to pry the ring off.

Sirius hopes he won’t pierce the skin, because it would suck to bring Voldemort back just for him to die from a snake bite.

He doesn’t see any blood, as the rings slowly slides of the finger.

And then, that, too, lands on the floor, somewhere behind Sirius.

It hurts to see Voldemort throwing his Horcruxes around, after Sirius treated them with such care; after he loved two of them.

Sirius steps inside the runic circle.

Here we go.

He cuts his finger and draws a rune on Voldemort's forehead, carefully, perfectly, with as much patience as he drew all the others.

Then, he looks down. "I- move," he whispers, and the snake, that was on Voldemort's chest, watching Sirius' work closely, slithers down, to the side.

It feels *wrong* to undress him, as he lays dead on that table, unable to defend himself-

He's right here, Sirius reminds himself, casting the snake a glance.

"I'm going to open the robe and unbutton the shirt," he finds himself saying, like an idiot, watching the snake for permission.

Voldemort also looks at him as if he's an idiot.

So Sirius does what he said, opening the robe, unbuttoning the shirt-

His heart lurches when he sees the familiar runes on Voldemort's body, the ones he remembers so well, not in blood- or not just blood-but ink and ash. It hurts when he sees so much of his skin, the way his ribs poke through it, how *thin* he always was.

When he was alive, with his great power surrounding him, Voldemort never looked frail.

He's frail now, unmoving, just a too thin body, too scarred, too broken, not having been cared for by anyone, treated harshly by everyone it encountered.

Even Sirius- Sirius was so rough with him, so *aggressive*…

A hiss, and Sirius shakes his head.

Fuck, the snake can surely feel my heartbeat.

Sirius needs to breathe again, for a few seconds, to stop his hand from trembling.

The snake watches, silently.

Finally, Sirius reopens the wound on his finger, and he starts drawing the final rune over Voldemort's heart.

When it's done, all the runes start glowing, all around him, activating, and Sirius feels them pulling at him, taking power from him.

He takes out his wand, and starts casting.

He closes his eyes, so he won't be distracted by Voldemort- the body or the snake. He needs to focus on the words, make sure he doesn't mispronounce any word.

The more he casts, the weaker he feels, power and magic draining from him.

He starts worrying he won't make it, but he reminds himself Voldemort is watching, and there's no failing when Voldemort is watching him. Sirius always excelled under his gaze,

always wanted to impress Voldemort.

He finishes the ritual, with great effort.

He opens his eyes.

All the runes look on fire, but, one by one they stop glowing, until only the one over Voldemort's heart remains bright.

Sirius feels a final *pull* at his magic, so hard it makes him stumble backwards, makes him gasp in pain-

The rune over Voldemort's heart stops glowing, too.

Don't faint, don't faint, don't faint, Sirius think, but he asked too much from his own body for the night.

He's struggling with air. He feels his lungs seizing up, and he stops breathing.

On the table, Voldemort's chest moves, rising with the first breath he took in eleven years.

Sirius blacks out.

(-)

He sits, only to be faced with the giant fucking snake. It hisses at him. Or possibly summons Voldemort.

He's on a couch, in the living room.

His wand is gone; but he doesn't need a wand to shove a snake away from him. It doesn't like it, flies to the wall and slams against it, throwing a fit when it lands back on the floor. The hissing intensifies. It coils, jaws open wide, ready to strike; its eyes are yellow now, far less intelligent.

I shouldn't kill his pet. What if Voldemort likes this snake? Wouldn't do to kill it.

More hissing, this time from behind, and Sirius stops giving any fuck about the angry snake, turns-
And there he is. Alive. Like he never left.

He's exactly as Sirius remembers him, and he's there, in the flesh, alive. In Grimmauld, as once Sirius used to fantasise, when he was young, and naive, and wanted it all- wanted his friends, his family, and Voldemort.

Sirius reminds himself that he, unlike Voldemort, has aged ten years.

He can't look away; he doesn't want to. He's terrified if he blinks, Voldemort will disappear.

He keeps his gaze, and those red eyes pierce him to his core, already healing the old, festering wound inside him that's been bleeding for a decade.

Sirius feels like *himself*, but because he hadn't been himself for a decade, it's hard to reconcile these two parts of him. It's as if the last years had been a hazy dream, and only now the world becomes real around him once more.

He wants to go to Voldemort, touch him, kiss him, hold him; he wants to kneel at his feet, he wants -anything. *Everything.*

But those eyes he missed so much, that haunted his dreams and his living hours, they look at Sirius in a way they haven't before.

Rage, hostility, suspicion- but Sirius would take that, too. Because they're open, *alive.*

Sirius can finally erase the memory of when they were unseeing, empty, in Godric's Hollow, that it had provoked such despair in Sirius he tried killing himself because he couldn't bear such loss.

"Eleven years," Voldemort says, softly, and his voice goes straight to Sirius' heart. "You left me to rot for eleven years."

"I made sure you wouldn't rot." Sirius' voice comes out strange. He gestures at Voldemort's perfectly preserved body, no rot in sight. As perfect as it always was, not a hair missing.

Voldemort is not amused "*Eleven years*."

"It's you that left me to rot," Sirius says, slowly, his mouth dry. "Like many others, I was taken to Azkaban-"

Voldemort steps closer, all made of menace, and Sirius' heart soars to witness it. It dissolves the memories of carrying that body to Grimmauld in his arms, frail, thin, dead, *empty*.

"You are obviously out of Azkaban," Voldemort says, and the snake hisses, agitated, somewhere behind Sirius. "You've been free for eleven years."

"It's that all you can say now? Eleven years?" Sirius challenges, because he feels reckless again.

Those eyes flash, and Voldemort's pale wand is now between his fingers.

How good it must feel to hold his wand after so long; Sirius remembers wrapping his fingers around his own, when he came home from Azkaban. Remembers how it made him feel human again, safe.

"You betrayed me. You left me. You married, had children and carried on with your life. You, Bella and Lucius. You found my Horcruxes, spilled all my secrets to each other and raised the boy that destroyed me."

Voldemort grips his wand tighter, his jaw flexing. Sirius remembers holding that jaw between his fingers, down in the dungeon, kissing cold lips, taking courage from Voldemort's body before he left for France.

Voldemort comes closer, still. He hisses something, and the snake goes silent.

Closer, *closer,* and Sirius doesn't back down, waits for Voldemort to reach him. Touch him. Breathe the same air again, face to face.

The house is restless, Sirius feels it inside himself; *threatened*. The protection wards flare, alert him of danger, but all Sirius wants is to reach out, grab Voldemort and kiss him.

He won't. He won't do that without permission. He'll never touch Voldemort without his consent again.

When the tip of the phoenix wand presses against his neck, Sirius shivers, but not with fear. The wand is an extension of Voldemort, so his body welcomes it.

Sirius leans into it, likes the way it presses against his flesh.

"I would advise against cursing me in my home," Sirius says, voice gentle, not wanting it to be a threat. "It will react badly to its master being attacked."

Voldemort sneers, and gods, he's so close now, looming over Sirius; he's only a couple of inches taller, yet he seems nine feet taller, all the same.

"You think I can't tame bricks, Sirius?" Voldemort hisses.

Sirius forgot this; he remembers so much, yet this, the way his name sounds from Voldemort's mouth, more intimate than anyone else says it…this, he forgot.

"I always gave you good advise," he says, holding his hands behind him, so he won't be tempted to sink them into Voldemort's robe and draw him closer. "If only you'd have listened. I told you to leave Harry alone. Bella told you. Everyone told you," he reminds Voldemort. "I married because I had to, as you pointed out, so long ago. I didn't spill your secrets- Lucius knew you handed him a Horcrux; Bella knew. I wasn't so special after all, I realised that after I found out you handed those things like candy. I never told them of the others. I took the cup from Bella, she never handed it over. I forced her out of Azkaban, too. She never renounced you, so she lost all her rights. I have legal custody of her, and her assets. I took the Horcrux from her vault. And she only learned of the ring because it almost killed me."

Silence. They stare at each other and Sirius feasts upon this man that destroyed his life. That made his life worth living. He can never have enough of him.

He's alive, he's back, Sirius' mind screams with relief. His entire body feels more relaxed than it's been in years. Even with the wand at his neck-

But the wand lowers.

Voldemort steps back. *No, no. Don't walk away.*

"I did warn you not to wear it too much," he says.

"You did," Sirius admits. *But I would have died without it. I'd have killed myself without Tom.*

"How did you break its influence?"

"Astral magic."

Another long silence.

"We need to talk about -" Sirius says, but Voldemort cuts over him.

"I have no desire to speak to you."

He's just angry, Sirius tells himself. *You expected he'll be angry. It will pass.*

It must pass.

Sirius forgave Voldemort for everything. He survived without him for eleven years.

But if Voldemort, alive and with a body, was to reject Sirius? Now, that, he won't forgive or survive.

Unthinkable.

"Harry is a Horcrux," Sirius says, straight to the point.

The rage in Voldemort's eyes abates for a second, gives way to shock, before the rage comes back.

"Your Horcrux," he clarifies, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

"Lies," Voldemort hisses.

"I'm not-"

"You think you can trick me?" Voldemort raises his wand again.

"You think I'd bring you back just to trick you?"

"You *abandoned* me!" Voldemort snarls, and the wards flare inside Sirius again. The house groans, audibly, the floor trembles. Sirius tries to soothe it, to let it know it's alright, but hundreds of his dead ancestor bled into these floors, and their blood, the magic they left behind, the sentiency they infused into these walls considers he is in danger, reacts to the magic gathering around Voldemort, even if Sirius doesn't. "You left me over a child! You forgot me-"

"I never fo-" Sirius tries to say, but Voldemort won't let him speak.

“And suddenly, once I crawl my own way out of that hell, once I threaten your precious spawn again, now you want to help me? You think me a fool?”

No. Not a fool. Never a fool.

Voldemort is broken, not foolish. A child, trapped in a Diary, a young man in a Ring, a lonely, lonely boy that was hurt so deeply, left behind.

“You’re doing it to protect him, not to help me. You realised I will always find my way back, on my merit, so you imagined you can trick me, manipulate me into sparing that boy! A *Horcrux*,” he spits. Do you even know what it takes to make one? You think you can create a Horcrux without knowing? Eleven years, and you couldn’t come up with a more credible lie?”

Sirius remembers how hard it was to believe, when he himself found out. He remembers how Tom convinced him. “If you’d only-”

Voldemort’s free hand goes into his robe, and then, in a flash, it’s out again.

Sirius’ wand clatters to the floor, at his feet.

“Pick it up!” he demands, but if Sirius does, Voldemort will attack him.

So he doesn’t. It only makes Voldemort angrier. Sirius can see it in his eyes, and then the chandelier above him dislodges itself from the ceiling, falls to the side, where Voldemort stands-

It dissolves in midair, with a flick of Voldemort’s wrist.

Stop, Sirius demands, focusing on subduing the house. But his focus keeps slipping from him, especially when Voldemort advances towards him, seemingly unbothered with Grimmauld Place determination to attack him.

“Pick it up,” he demands, once more, voice so strangled with rage it comes out as an almost whisper.

“No.”

Whatever bond they have, it’s deeper than love, stronger than sex, more powerful than time, and pain, and betrayal. Sirius *feels* it, knows it, has lived it for eleven years, and so must have Voldemort, because he will not attack Sirius if Sirius isn’t at least holding his wand.

“You won’t hold your own wand, but you *stole* mine,” Voldemort says next, and Sirius can hear the set of armours in the hallway upstairs coming alive-

Stop, he demands again. *I’m safe.* But the wards don’t believe him.

And this is why Dark Magic has the reputation it does, why it’s so warned against.

Dark Magic, once unleashed, comes alive on its own, out of the control of the caster, even.

Dark Magic saved Harry that night, bound to his blood, and, ten years later, killed Quirrell, protected Harry, without Harry even wanting it.

I'm not eleven, Sirius reminds himself, and forces the house to quiet down, but it's so taxing to do it, and he's so tired already, so distracted.

"You abandoned me, stole my Horcruxes, and then you took my wand without my permission! Care to explain why the last spells it performed aren't ones I cast?"

The wand is the most sacred thing to a wizard; as important as a limb, as intimate as an organ, the connection between the core and the magic of the owner stronger than even blood, some say-

"Harry's wand is made of the same core as yours," Sirius says, and this shocks Voldemort again, makes his jaws flex. "The same bird, twin feathers, and it picked him because he carries your soul in his forehead-"

But Voldemort is too angry. "It picked him because he was prophesied to destroy me. Don't pretend now to not believe in the prophecy! If before you had an excuse, now you do not. He did destroy me! You cannot deny it to my face! Not after I've been dead for *eleven years!*"

"You've met him," Sirius says; when he realises his temper is rising, his voice as well, he forces himself to reign it in. "You've graded his papers, for Merlin's sake! Surely, you must have realised he's just a regular kid!"

Harry's grades are *fine*. He passed all his exams, gotten everything from Acceptable to Exceeded expectations, even an Outstanding. *'A clever boy, but I wish he'd apply himself more'*, McGonagall wrote to Sirius, on his end of the year report.

Sirius bets that if he'd get his hands on Tom's Riddle grades, he wouldn't find anything but Outstanding.

He had no parents Slughorn could write to, but no one would ever describe Tom Riddle as 'not applying himself' or 'doesn't make much of an effort'.

How on earth can anyone believe Harry is -or will ever be- capable of even the slightest comparison to Voldemort?

There is no being, besides Dumbledore, that is on his level. *How can he not see it?*

"How many regular children do you think can pass through the security measures Dumbledore put in front of the stone?"

"Those weren't placed by Dumbledore," Sirius tries, but he's wasting his breath. "He indulged his colleagues, let them contribute- you think not many kids can pass through a Devil's Snare?" Sirius asks, incredulous. "Or catch a key? Those were *jokes*, as competent as the people that made them! Granted, McGonagall's test was better, and the Weasley boy passed that one, not Harry!"

Voldemort frowns, but, once again, his anger won't let him think.

“Snape’s test was clever, and the muggleborn solved that one-”

“Fine,” Voldemort snarls. “And Potter passed the *actual* test, one made by Dumbledore himself. The Mirror.”

“It was a test of character, not of power or intelligence. Only a child, in fact, could pass that test, only the pure of heart.”

The stone was perfectly safe. Voldemort, Quirrell, Snape, Sirius, a hoard of powerful armies wouldn’t have gotten that fucking stone out of the mirror. Dumbledore protected it admirably.

The only reason the stone was ever in danger was because *Harry* took it out.

No one thinks of children when they make ridiculous complicated spells. Voldemort didn’t think of children when he charmed his boat in the cave to only carry one wizard. Dumbledore didn’t place those protections on the mirror with children in mind, either. He protected it from those trying to *steal* it, and no one that wanted to steal it and use it would have ever been able to get it from the Mirror.

Who would have anticipated an innocent child will just wish to take the stone out to protect it?

“He killed Quirrell!” Voldemort yells. “How many eleven year olds do you know of that kill people just with their touch!”

“My *house* is about to show you it can kill people,” Sirius warns, as the house, does, indeed attempt to shrink around them, anything to eliminate the threat it sees in Voldemort. “Because that is what blood protection does. Lily-”

“Stop defending him!”

Fine. Now it’s not the time, clearly. Voldemort needs to calm down, get used to his body again, to a brain, relearn how to use the fucking thing- surely, that will help him think better down the line.

“Are you- are you alright?” Sirius asks, instead. It must be jarring to find oneself in a human body again, after living as a wraith, or as a snake.

Voldemort gives him an incredulous look. Why is he surprised? Sirius brought him back, for fuck’s sake, why is it impossible to believe he’d worry about him?

He lowers his wand, again. Very unlike the dark lord to raise his wand, *twice*, without delivering on the threat.

“I will kill him,” Voldemort insists.

Sirius really did not want to come to this. He hoped telling Voldemort Harry is a Horcrux would be enough.

“I killed a man, in Belgium,” Sirius says, softly.

Silence falls between them.

“I heard you killed plenty,” Voldemort answers, after some seconds.

“Only, I was in *France*,” Sirius goes on, and now, the house settles around them, because Voldemort’s magic is no longer filled with anger.

There’s a curious expression on his face, fighting with his rage.

“He was miles ahead of me, he was getting away, and there was no feasible way I could catch up to him. So…I reached out, through the stars. I reached out and I willed him dead.”

Hunger and *fear* spark in those eyes Sirius loves more than he loves himself.

“I did not need to touch him, I didn’t need the wand- your wand, yes. I have no need for such things, not when I have the stars.”

And now it’s Sirius that steps closer. “Many will call me an idiot for bringing you back, even knowing you might turn against me. Yet I am not without protection,” Sirius warns.

“You’re threatening me,” Voldemort states. It’s not even with anger, but with….*satisfaction,* almost. As if Sirius is proving him right.

“No. I want you alive and well and thriving. I always wanted that.” Sirius is so close now, so close he could touch. He wants to touch.

But he won’t. Not without permission.

He has nightmares of the first time he fucked Voldemort. Without permission. How rough he’d been, how he’d taken his pleasure, without any care for Voldemort’s. How he wanted to punish Voldemort, to hurt him.

He can’t forgive himself for it. He can’t- he can’t forget it, the way Voldemort just let him, pliant.

He doesn’t want to know what Voldemort was thinking as it happened, why he allowed it, why he took the pain, *expected* it, even.

It fills Sirius with maddening guilt.

“I would kill all those that hurt you, if it is in my power,” Sirius says. “Back then, If I believed Harry was a threat to you, I would have killed him myself,” he whispers.

Another thing that fills him with guilt. He almost considered killing Harry back then even without believing Harry was a danger to Voldemort. When Snape suggested it, a part of Sirius so readily agreed. He didn’t know Harry- he thought he loved him, but he hadn’t. Only as Harry grew, only as Sirius got to know him, only then Sirius loved him, saw him as his own person. “If I would have thought James was a threat to you, I’d have killed him, too.”

Voldemort’s eyes flicker to his lips, then right back up to hold his gaze.

“If you want me to kill Dumbledore, ask it of me. Ask it, and it shall be done. I can kill him in a second, as soon as he steps outside, under the stars.”

And now Voldemort’s eyes go wide; *wild*. He steps back, and Sirius yearns to close the distance again, but he won’t, he can’t, he will never again cross any boundaries Voldemort sets between them. “I’ll burn down the world for you. But you mustn’t touch what is mine; my family is of no threat to you, will never be. And Harry is my son. I wish so desperately you understand -even if you do not believe he is a Horcrux, I wish you could understand *I* control Harry; not Dumbledore, not James, not the Ministry- I control him now. He does what I say, he believes what I tell him. He will never hurt you. I won’t let him. And you will never hurt him. I won’t let you. I will do anything for you- *anything*- but do not attempt to harm my family. You know me,” he reminds Voldemort. “You know it isn’t like me to come up with some convoluted plot, to bring you back just to lie about Harry being a Horcrux; that sort of madness is what you’d do, not what I’d do.”

Voldemort hisses something, and the snake slithers on the floor, jumps on Voldemort’s leg, coils around him. He looks at Sirius, and this time, his feature go blank. “I knew you,” Voldemort says, and even his voice is flat. “The Sirius I knew wouldn’t come up with such *convoluted* plans. But that man no longer exists. A Black Head of House now stands in his stead.”

And then he walks past Sirius, with his snake around him; he stops down in the hallway. He stops, and looks up at Orion’s Black’s portrait, then back to Sirius. His lip curls up in distaste. “I don’t know you any longer,” he says, and it *hurts*.

Oh, how cruel Voldemort is. He never was, before. Not with Sirius. Not intentionally, at least.

He hurt Sirius tremendously, but he hadn’t meant to. Now, he *meant* it.

Sirius watches him go, and, seconds later, he hears the front door opening, then closing.

Finally, the house calms down, the wards content again.

Sirius walks to his father’s portrait. He, too, looks up.

It was true; for the last many years, Sirius hadn’t been Sirius.

How ironic that Voldemort would say that exactly on the night Sirius comes alive again.

It’s painful, so very painful, and he’s angry, and happy, sorrowful, joyful, filled with anticipation and dread. It is excruciating, but Sirius is himself, once more.

He was right. Everything he thought lost, has come back with Voldemort.

He is no longer numb.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trophy gleams in the candlelight, recently polished. With how much life enjoys its little ironies, it might have been young Harry that polished it; the boy does find himself on the bad end of Severus' temper quite often, after all. Or Minerva might have given Harry detention for his inability to stay still in class.

Albus watches the trophy, remembers the ceremony, half a century ago. He remembers it so vividly, as if it was only yesterday.

Tall, back straight, shoulders stiff, hair coifed to perfection, Tom smiled when Armando handed him the trophy.

"He's a good lad, he is," Armando often told Albus. *"I know he has his…oddities, but, surely Albus, you wouldn't begrudge him some peculiarities. You weren't the most normal student, either, have you forgotten? He's simply very gifted."*

Tom was very gifted, that was never a point of contention. Intelligent, powerful, and so painfully charismatic. Oh, how Albus' colleagues loved Tom, fawned over him, how they saw that perfect exterior and missed the rage hiding behind it, the malicious glint in his eyes, the disdain hidden in his honeyed words.

He was so good, it made Albus doubt himself. When everyone around him adored Tom, but Albus saw only a tragedy waiting to happen, it made him think perhaps he was paranoid, that he was projecting another man's crimes onto Tom.

"I have this student," he told Aberforth, newly proud owner of a bar in Hogsmeade. *"This boy, Riddle. I have a bad feeling about him, yet no one else shares my opinion."*

His relationship with Aberforth was as strained as it has always been, but ever since that night, that awful night that cost him everything, Albus has only ever trusted Aberforth.

Aberforth, who saw who Gellert was within seconds of meeting him, when it took Albus months to reach the same conclusion. When it took the loss of Ariana.

"He's rotten," Aberforth told Albus, after he met Tom on a Hogsmeade visit. "*To the core."*

Months later, that poor girl was found dead in a bathroom, and Albus was the first to find Tom. Albus went looking for him as soon as he heard the news.

He found him in the library, studying. But the book opened before him was backwards, his eyes were glazed, his perfect hair was not so perfect, a wet strand hanging over his forehead.

Albus knew then, that he killed her. He knew *before* he found Tom, truth be told. As soon as he was notified a girl died, he knew.

Albus looked at him, seated alone at that library table, and Tom raised his gaze, but he was looking right through Albus.

They said nothing to each other. Only later in the evening, after the Aurors investigated and carried that small, lifeless body down the stairs, only then did Tom show up again, asked Albus what will happen to the school.

And Albus told him they will shut Hogwards down if the perpetuator isn't found. It wasn't true; he just wanted to know what Tom would do.

Hours later, Tom dragged poor Hagrid to Armando's office, declaring he found the culprit.

And Albus could have said an Acromantula doesn't fit the story, that the girl's body was found without a single mark on it; a spider victim wouldn't have looked so…pristine, for lack of a better word.

He said nothing, however. He only fought for Hagrid to be allowed to stay on the grounds, convinced the Aurors and Armando it was an accident, and Hagrid meant no harm.

They knew it, too, they must have known it. The Head Auror just blinked, slowly, when Armando offered the Acromantula explanation; even Armando sounded ashamed to say it. It was so *ridiculous*.

But the Board of Governors wanted the matter closed, and old Sirius Black put pressure on the Aurors to let it be, as well.

And so, Tom was handed his award for special services to the school, and he smiled, and he did not meet Albus' eyes again, until he left Hogwarts entirely, two years later.

Even Horace saw Tom for who he was, after that. He stopped talking so highly of his favourite pupil, his 'rising star'. He started eating, more and more, and after Tom left Hogwarts, Horace never mentioned his name again.

Tom Marvolo Riddle. It glints proudly on the trophy, defiant. Yet it doesn't only defy Albus; it defies Voldemort, as well.

Which is why Albus kept the trophy here, on display. Solid proof of Tom. Of that tall, proud, twisted boy that thought so highly of himself, he imagined he got away with murder, that he fooled everyone with his silly story, when in reality it was corruption that saved him. That, and Albus' silence.

I let him get away with it.

And Albus did it again, decades later, when Tom returned to ask for a teaching job. He let him leave the castle.

Could I have stopped him, then? Or was he already far too powerful?

Albus shivers, feels the stain Tom left on the castle that night. The curse runs strong, still. Ran strong all these years Tom was away, a mere wraith. Nothing Albus did would remove it from the Defence Position. He caved and sought expert opinion, told himself he doesn't know everything, even as a part of him is perfectly aware he *does* know everything, but he dismissed his own arrogance and brought professionals in curse removal, that made even less progress than Albus had.

No, it was too late by then. Tom Riddle returned to Hogwarts, and finally met Albus' eyes again, as he introduced himself by his new name.

Yet his eyes…dead. Gone. In a way, Voldemort is right. The boy, twisted and rotten as he was, died along the way.

Tom's eyes, full of hidden malice, were devoid of everything when he returned. It was soul that he was lacking, Albus finally understands. But what he lacked in soul, he more than made up for it in power.

It was already too late to stop him.

"News?" Albus asks, and Severus curses softly under his breath, somewhere behind him, making Albus smile.

Severus fancies himself undetectable, quiet and efficient, at home in the shadows. He's perpetually disturbed he cannot hide from Albus.

"Nothing," he says, coming into the Trophy Room, and Albus turns to greet him. "I've met with Lucius, with Walden, Avery- no one has heard from him."

That is concerning.

When Severus came to him a week prior, in a frenzy, paler than ever, and rolled his sleeve to show his Mark, dark again, Albus expected it. He always knew Voldemort would return.

Yet he failed to summon Severus. Albus guessed perhaps it was because he doubted Severus' loyalties, yet if he hadn't contacted any Death Eater…

What is he doing?

"And no guesses as to who brought him back?"

Severus looks exhausted. *Oh, you poor man. This is nothing.* Albus knows Severus will only look worse and worse when the time comes for Voldemort to actually recall his Death Eaters again.

He leans on the wall, shoves his hair out of his eyes, with his slender, potion stained fingers. He already lost weight, and it's only been a week.

What horrors Voldemort brings back with him.

“There is a-it’s so stupid, though, that I wouldn’t have believed it. But Lucius confirmed it, so it’s probably true, no matter how fantastical.”

Severus never can quite hide his admiration for Lucius Malfoy. Like Tom before him, Severus’ eyes and voice drip with disdain often, but when he speaks of Malfoy, that disdain goes away, replaced with respect.

And jealousy.

“Go on.”

“They say Barty did it. Barty Crouch Junior.”

That is quite… fantastical, indeed, but Albus has seen and heard stranger things, so he doesn’t interrupt Severus as he speaks.

And the more the tale unfolds, the truer it sounds.

Oh, Barty, Albus thinks. Of the father.

A father’s love knows no bounds, not even when duty is at stake.

Albus’ own father committed heinous crimes to avenge little Ari.

When the Aurors told his mother, she wept. Albus was hiding in the cupboard, squeezed between brooms and jars of marmalade.

Good, he thought, when he heard how his father tortured those muggle boys. He felt an ugly, twisted sense of justice.

It took him years to realise that was not justice. It was revenge, and it did not bring Ari back. It only stole their father away, too.

“Lucius wouldn’t say who discovered this plot, and who got Barty away from his father. But, whoever it was, apparently now Barty escaped from them, too, and he went after the dark lord.”

“Who do you think it was?” Albus asks, watching him carefully.

Severus’ nose twitches. “I think it was Lucius,” he says, begrudgingly.

“I think so, too.”

It would explain what happened a couple of years prior, the way Lucius started pocking at Barty Sr in Wizengamot sessions. And how Barty resigned soon after.

“Yet I can’t immagine how Barty Jr would escape from Lucius’ hold,” Severus insists. “Lucius is efficient! He’d have made sure Barty can’t escape.”

If Albus wouldn't know how strong Severus'…love? obsession? runs for Lily, then he'd suspect the young man might be interested in Lucius.

It was the blond that recruited Severus, freshly out of school, all those years ago.

And, eventually, Severus recognised all his former friends were terrible people, yet never Lucius, never fully.

Severus isn't wrong about the efficiency, however. Lucius wouldn't make mistakes that would enable Barty to escape. Lucius is clearly enjoying himself immensely these days, and would have nothing to gain if Voldemort returned, but everything to lose.

Lucius would have only looked at Barty as an asset to be used against his father, he'd be chained in those infamous dungeons in Malfoy Manor.

Severus is too young to know it, but stories have been going around for hundreds of years. Many people have entered beautiful, elegant Malfoy Manor, to never return again, their bones lost in the terrors underneath the house.

An apt representation of the pureblood nobility. Beautiful, civilised, educated, but deep underneath…oh, therein lie horrors, dark and dirty and full of skeletons.

No, Abus doesn't see how Barty would escape from under Lucius' ever vigilant eye.

He does know, however, of someone that wouldn't look at Barty just as an asset. Of someone that wanted to do better, but his heart forever holds love for terrible people.

Sirius has compassion, empathy. He has it *still*, and he could make a mistake. He'd be especially vulnerable to keeping someone captive, after he experienced captivity himself.

He vaguely remembers young Barty was very close with Regulus. Did Regulus convince Sirius to be lax with Barty's security?

Did Regulus perhaps help Barty escape?

Or, more worryingly…did Sirius let him escape?

Surely not. Sirius adores his sons, it's clear as day. He adores Harry. He would do anything to protect his family.

He did terrible, unspeakable things to the Roux family, all in the name of keeping his family safe. He wouldn't knowingly facilitate Voldemort's return.

Would he?

Ever since Severus showed him the Mark, Albus has been busy planning, attempting to guess Voldemort's next move, his goals, how to counteract them.

Oh, he's been so busy, yet his thoughts often stray towards Sirius and his …situation.

No one had seen him in public in the past week. Albus asked.

Is he with Voldemort? And if he is…Albus just can't imagine this happening voluntarily.

Sirius looks well, these days. Black men have this pattern, reaching their peek, in every way, when they hit their thirties. Sirius looks stable, strong, capable.

Yet Albus will never forget him broken, thin- oh, so thin a gust of wind could carry him away.

At his trial, just sitting there, in chains, blind and deaf to everything going on around him, eyes clouded, gaze far away, only gaining some tenuous focus when his mother caught his attention from the strands. The way he looked at her then, like a scared child, wouldn't even blink, ignoring the men around him deciding his fate.

Albus will never forget him the day after, when with those frail arms he pushed that horrible muggle to the wall, no longer looking defenceless, but crazed, lost to madness, murder and violence in his gaze, as unfocused as it's been at the trail.

Yet when he took Harry, he wrapped him inside his robe with so much *gentleness* and care… with such purpose.

Albus will never forget, almost a year later, when Sirius came to Hogwarts, looking somehow, impossibly, worse than the last time they saw each other.

"Of course I loved him! But it was too late- he's too broken to value it, no matter how hard I tried."

The way he kept touching the ring. The Deathly Hallow, for Albus, but for Sirius, it had a different meaning. For Sirius, it was a gift from a man he loved. And he kept caressing it, all throughout the meeting, as he grew more and more agitated.

As his eyes filled with tears that never fell.

Albus never imagined someone could ever love Voldemort. Oh, he knows his followers worship him, that they are drawn to him like moths to flame, to his power. That they want to breathe it it, feel it touch them; that they chased Voldemort's protection, or his empty promises. They wanted power, simple as that.

Sirius was born to power. If he wanted it, he'd have stayed home. Or returned home. He'd have hid behind his grandfather, the way he did *after* Azkaban, *after* he finally got out of his home and started going out in public; for some years, he'd only come with Arcturus, walk slightly behind him, obeyed Arcturus' every order.

It's why Albus thought he'd be immune to Voldemort's….specific appeal. He knew a boy like Sirius wouldn't be so impressed with dark magic and power, with remarkable men, since he had seen it all, had had it all at his fingertips, since the crib.

He never imagined Sirius would see something else in Voldemort. What else is there to see?

How could Voldemort, charismatic and accomplished liar that he is, tell a lie *so great* as to make a bright young man love him? Truly love him, not because he was the dark lord, but *despite* of it.

It wasn't Azkaban that broke Sirius, that reduced a young man like him to the ghost Albus remembers, to ruins.

No, it was love that did that. Only love can do that. Only loving a monster, only the betrayal they can inflict, leaving nothing in their wake, just pain and broken pieces, broken lives.

Voldemort has only left for a handful of minutes, and already owls are arriving at his window.

From Yaxley, Parkinson, Nott, Avery, Crabbe, Goyle, Macnair and many others. They must have felt the Dark Mark.

Sirius ignores them all. He can't help but notice Lucius didn't write, so Sirius takes the floo to the manor.

Narcissa is surprised Sirius would visit so late, unannounced; she was having tea with Lucius, who sits on his armchair, staring into space.

"What is it with the owls?" Narcissa asks, exasperated, as her house-elf comes with a new envelope, from 'Mr Avery, this time'. "Has something happened, Lucius? Lucius?" She frowns at her husband.

"Wizengamot stuff," Sirius says. "If you'll excuse us for a second?"

Narcissa's frown deepens, but after she takes another look at Lucius, she excuses herself.

Heavy silence falls over the room.

"He's back," Lucius finally says. He looks afraid.

"Yes."

"You brought him back?" Lucius knows Sirius too well. He doesn't even wait for an answer. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. He…he's a tad angry, you can imagine."

Lucius turns to stare at him. "So, you unleashed him into the world and you have no idea where he is?"

That is exactly what Sirius did.

“You can tell him you wanted to resurrect him for years, but I didn’t let you,” Sirius offers. “I’ll confirm it.” Eventually. When Voldemort forgives Sirius and deigns to speak to him.

“And Bella? Will she confirm it?” Lucius asks with a sneer.

Sirius nods. “We spoke of it already, before I- we agreed to it. She might not show it, but she cares for you.”

Most importantly, she cares for Cissa and Draco. She agreed to cover for Lucius.

Lucius stands, pours himself a glass of whiskey and downs it in one gulp. He breathes in and takes the unopened letters waiting for him.

Sirius retreats back to Grimmauld, where he finds Regulus pacing.

“He’s back!” his brother says, and he shows Sirius the Mark on his arm.

“I know. I just went to see Lucius-”

“Fucking Barty!” Regulus yells. “It has to be him!”

Regulus has been looking for Barty for months now, stumped about the escape.

“We must-”

“No,” Sirius cuts over him. “You mustn’t do anything.”

“Sirius, I am not seventeen any longer. You can’t just expect me to-”

“If he calls through the Mark, don’t go-”

“Of course I won’t go! I’m not a dog to be summoned by a half-blood!”

Well, thank the gods for his brother’s bigotry.

“Don’t get involved. Let me handle it. No,” he cuts over Regulus. “You’ll obey me, it’s your duty,” he reminds his brother. “You’ll stay safe, just in case. You need to stay safe!”

They argue for hours.

Sirius ignores all the letters he receives. Even Dumbledore’s Patronus, that asks him to come to Hogwarts. Snape must have told him about the Mark.

He’s only now understanding the chaos he unleashed; he was aware it was coming, of course, but now he’s living it.

He…likes it. The adrenaline, the way everyone is suddenly so desperate, the tension, the flurry of letters.

Once more, Voldemort causes all this anxiety, to so many people, just by existing again.

He orders Regulus to come live in Grimmauld, full time. He wants his family where he can see it and protect it, now that Voldemort is back.

His mother and grandmother, Isadora and Elara are blissfully clueless.

Narcissa would have remained clueless for a while longer, too, Lucius clearly would have wanted to spare her this mental anguish for a while longer, only Bella disappeared. And, naturally, Narcissa cannot ignore that.

So Lucius tells her, and Sirius tells Andromeda, also desperately searching for where Bella might have gone to.

"You are happy about this," Andromeda notices, shocked. She's pacing up and down the room, wringing her hands, worried, and she doesn't understand why Sirius apparently looks happy.

Do I? Sirius can't tell how he looks.

"He killed Potter he targeted your Harry, you were never a dedicated blood purist- I don't get it!"

So Sirius tells her. *Everything*.

At first, she's surprised, then horrified, and finally settles on anger. "So you can fall in love with a half-blood with no name, with a *man*, but you made a scene about Ted!" she yells, which is unfair.

Sirius never made a scene about Ted. He allowed her to have Ted and the family, both. Just… separately.

"Ted is a banker," Sirius sneers. "Voldemort is a dark lord. Do not compare them."

Suddenly, Andromeda is quite relieved Dora is in Romania. "Swear to me," she demands. "Swear to me that no matter what happens, my daughter will never be harmed or involved with anything. Swear it, on your father's memory!"

Sirius swears.

He grows more careful where he allows his own children to visit.

And, finally, he takes Astrid aside, into his office. They never talk in the office, but Sirius just has the impulse to take her there.

"Voldemort is back," he announces.

She blinks, twice. "Wasn't he dead?"

"Apparently not. He's back, and…well. Things will change."

“How will they change?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he admits. “We’re waiting to see what he does.”

“And Harry? Is Harry safe? We should take him from that awful school and move him to-”

“Harry will be fine. There are some things that…he’ll be safe. I’ll talk to Voldemort and he’ll understand he’s to stay away from Harry.”

She frowns. “You will serve Voldemort again?” Her nose wrinkles at the word ‘serve’.

Sirius shows her the Mark, that she had never truly seen before, not as clear. “This is for life; it’s quite hard to ignore.”

“There will be war?”

“Most likely, yes. But you will be protected, and the boys as well. You needn’t worry uselessly. However, I’d like for you to….just be aware of your surroundings. Perhaps you should stop your weekly girls’ outings.”

Astrid and her friends like to go out every week or so, have a drink and a meal away from their husbands and children.

“Manors should be safe. But, for the moment, don’t wander on the streets. Not alone. And not with the children. If you need something, I shall accompany you. Or Regulus.”

She sighs, rubs at her temples. “Fine. But we should take Harry away from Dumbledore, and we shouldn’t send our sons to Hogwarts. Dumbledore is your-our enemy now, isn’t he? Since we are siding with Voldemort?”

Astrid is one of the few people that calls Voldemort by his name. She never had to live with fear of that name, or with the terror that is Voldemort.

“I’ll decide that,” Sirius tells her, gently, but firmly.

Harry, at the moment, is safest at Hogwarts. Now that Dumbledore knows Voldemort is back, he will keep a very close eye on Harry and security, unlike the past year.

Until Voldemort accepts Harry is a Horcrux, there truly is no safer place for Harry than under Dumbledore’s nose.

Sirius hesitated for a couple of days before he sent Dumbledore a note. *‘Harry has the Cloak,’* he wrote. Just to make sure the old man knows Harry can disappear under the Hallow.

Kreacher later informed Sirius a blank piece of paper appeared on a bench at Black Manor and that no matter how Kreacher tried to get rid of it, it kept returning to the bench.

When Sirius went to investigate, as soon as he touched the parchment, Dumbledore’s neat handwriting appeared.

"Hogwarts is always open to you, if you need it," it said and it infuriated Sirius. Why does Dumbledore have to be so bloody kind, to offer Sirius help, when Sirius offered to kill him for Voldemort?

He chose to focus on his anger that the old man somehow managed to trespass onto the Black property and use incredible magic to make sure Sirius, and only Sirius, will receive his message.

He probably had his bloody phoenix deliver the note, since no ward on earth can guard against a phoenix.

Does he worry I am trapped?

Why can't Dumbledore just accept Sirius is a horrible man and write him off completely? It would be easier for Sirius to hate him and, in case Voldemort wants it, kill the Professor.

"Do not gossip with the girls about this; many of them don't know Voldemort is back, or if they do, they understand it's never a good idea to speak of him."

Astrid nods. "May I tell Father?"

Astrid isn't especially close to Thor, they barely exchange letters, as opposed to how often she writes to her mother or younger sister, but Astrid always feels safer if her father is aware of everything important going on in her life.

"Yes."

(-)

Dear Sirius,

Since you made me promise to tell you every single thing that could be 'dangerous', no matter how small- my scar is hurting again, like it did when…you know. When 'Quirrell' was around.

For a couple of weeks now, it's hurting often. I have odd nightmares that I don't know what to make of.

I'm trapped in a forest, and I'm alone and scared. I don't have a body and I want to call your name, but I can't because I don't have a voice.

I don't know what this nightmare means. I promise I have no reason to be scared at all! Everything is going great (except stupid Lockhart! I can't stand him. I'd rather the dark lord as a teacher again, honestly; Lockhart is that bad. You know, actually- will you talk to him to tell him to leave me alone? He's forcing me to manage his fan mail…)

Anyway, that's the only 'strange' thing going on. My headaches and these flashes of anger or fear I get out of nowhere, even when I am just hanging out with my friends.

Hermione says it's probably hormones, something stupid about adolescence or whatever; I dunno, I didn't pay attention.

Love,

Harry.

P.S.: Marvolo is sending me two letters a day! I love him, and I want to hear from him, but I have owls hounding me during class or when I'm trying to eat or walk around. Tell him to just remember everything he wants to say and send it all in one single letter, please! I really don't need to know Helix bit Kreacher on Tuesday morning, or that Orion apparently doesn't like apple pie anymore. Oh, he did send a picture with Astrid's new dress! Tell her she looks beautiful, as always!

(-)

Sirius can't sleep, so he's wide awake when the door to his room opens in the middle of the night, and Bella sneaks inside.

He sits up in his bed, just as she throws herself on the mattress and gives an exhausted sigh.

"You don't look too well," he says, after a minute.

Bella's nail polish is chipped, her curls aren't perfect and glossy. She doesn't even have her trademark red lipstick.

She snorts, but when she turns to look at him, she smiles.

"Where are you staying? At the cabin?"

She shakes her head. "I wish. No, I'm in a fucking madhouse. You don't even want to know."

"I do want to know." Desperately.

Sirius can't stop thinking of Voldemort. All day long, all Sirius thinks of is him.

She supports herself on her elbow. "I can't tell you, actually. He's paranoid enough as it is."

Sirius tries not to get angry, or hurt. "Is he fucking crazy? I can find him in a second!"

She sighs again. "As soon as the sun sets, he fucks off, Apparating around the county to 'confuse you'. He comes back at dawn."

"Wow." Sirius can't think of anything else to say.

“Yeah. So I’m trapped there with Barty- was he always batshit crazy? And the fucking snake! In a muggle house, Sirius. It’s *muggle.*” She shivers.

Muggle house?

For some strange reason, Sirius thinks of the manor in Little Hangleton.

“We didn’t eat for a week! *He* was too paranoid to let any of us leave and steal food from the village. I Imperiused the muggle to do our bidding, eventually. The muggle that *lives* with us!” She stares at him. “I’m living with a muggle!”

“But how is he?” Sirius whispers. He’d have laughed to hear of Bella living with a muggle, but right now all he cares about is Voldemort.

She collapses back on the bed. “He stays locked in his room most of the day, hissing at his snake. Lately he started coming out more, talking to Barty and I. And the muggle.”

“The muggle?”

Bella nods, pained.

He’ll talk to a muggle, but not me?

“I tried telling him about Harry, that he’s a Horcrux, that he’s a Parselmouth,” she says. “At first he didn’t even want to hear about it, accused me of lying and treachery. So I told him to use Legilimency!”

“And?”

“Well, because I have never actually witnessed Harry speak Parseltongue, I only have the memory of you telling me he can do it. So now he’s convinced you lied to me.”

“I can’t lie to you!” Sirius says, outraged. “Doesn’t he fucking know that?”

“He’s irrational.” She rolls her eyes. “At first he was angry with me, but now he persuaded himself I was simply deceived by you and Father, manipulated into not coming to his aid.”

“Has he met you?”

She waves it away. “At least he talks to me, now! He’s calming down a tad.” She sighs. “He’s wearing his Horcruxes all the time. The ring and the locket are fine, and the diary fits in his pocket, but the cup…he just walks around with it!”

“Does he even sleep? If he’s busy Apparating around at night like a madman-”

“Gods know what he does in his room. Though judging by the look of him, I don’t think he’s sleeping much. He’s not eating, either. I can barely eat myself.” She scrunches up her nose. “Muggle food! And, at first, the muggle was cooking it! I’d *never*! When my lord saw Barty and I were starving, now he cooks.” She smiles, slightly. “I didn’t know he can cook! And it’s palatable, too!”

Sirius is burning with jealousy. He wants Voldemort to cook for him, not Bella and Barty.

Bella crawls into the bed until she lies half on top of Sirius. “Now, let me sleep. I need to go home to Evy tomorrow, the Auror is supposed to come and check on me. I can’t wait to get my clothes and makeup!”

For the next weeks, Bella only ever comes on the day she’s supposed to meet an Auror, as per the conditions of her release. Not that the Auror always shows up; they were really strict in the beginning, but during the past five or so years, it happens often that no one comes on the scheduled day.

(-)

Astrid’s older sister decides to visit them, out of the blue, which was the last thing Sirius needed in his life.

Astrid is not too happy either, she’s especially peeved with the short notice, and she goes on a shopping spree, managing the feat of a lifetime, redecorating almost all of Black Manor in just ten days.

“What was wrong with it?” Sirius’ mother asks. “You redecorated a couple years ago!”

“It’s already out of style,” Astrid says.

She’d love to redecorate Grimmauld, who Sirius thinks had last been ‘in style’ a couple hundreds years ago, but Sirius wasn’t receptive to the idea. *“Mother would kill you,”* he said, years ago when she first asked, finding it easier to blame it on his mum than to admit he doesn’t want anything changed. Well, he let her redecorate her own room and the nursery a couple of time, but nothing else.

In Black manor, only his office remains untouched, otherwise the decor keeps changing, once every few years, to such extent Sirius got lost a few times.

“It’s like we get a new house, every time,” Orion joked.

Astrid is in some odd competition with Freya, had been so her entire life, and she’s always so stressed during these visits, wanting everything to be perfect, changing not only the house and her wardrobe, but the kids and Sirius’ as well.

Astrid, between all the crazy shopping, somehow finds time to pester poor Helix, trying to convince him to stop biting whenever something upsets him.

“You’re not cutting my hair!” Orion yells at her. “Don’t even think about it!”

“But it’s so long! You look like Elara!”

“I don’t! Stop it! Father, stop her, she’s gone mad!”

“Let him be,” Sirius says, from his armchair, perusing the newspapers as he does every morning, stomach in knots, hoping and dreading he’ll find some news that would indicate Voldemort is out and about again.

He found nothing so far. Lucius hasn’t been summoned, either. Not Avery, not Corban, *no one*. Unless they’re all lying to Sirius….

“You need a haircut, too,” Astrid says, coming closer to Sirius. "You missed your appointment last month. And this month.”

Sirius tunes her out and eventually she goes away.

When Freya and her husband finally arrive, and they welcome them in Black manor, Astrid at least appears her usual calm, unbothered self.

Freya’s husband looks exhausted, and he’s also wearing the newest Italian robes on the market.

He rolls his eyes at Sirius, and Sirius smiles, because they’re both used to this by now.

The children, two boys, one a year older than Orion, the other a few months younger than Marvolo, immediately want to see the abraxans, and all the boys run off into the garden, except Helix, perched on Sirius’ hip, babbling to himself.

“Did we win?” Sirius asks, after dinner is finally over and they’re in the master bedroom.

Astrid huffs. “I always win. I have you and she has that dimwit husband of hers.”

(-)

“Hey,” Sirius says, entering Marvolo’s bedroom, after Kreacher told him he’s there. He finds the boy perched on his bed, drawing.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing up here?”

Marvolo shrugs. “They don’t want to play with me.”

The worst part is Sirius can’t force people to play with Marvolo. He guesses he could, Lucius certainly forced many kids into playing with Draco, but…it wouldn’t do Marvolo any favours, would it?

Even if Sirius doesn't like to intervene between the kids, seeing Marvolo standing alone, on the edge of the small Quidditch era in their garden, did something to him.

He blames Voldemort for it. Sirius is awfully sensitive these days.

Orion and the Norwegian boys were laughing, passing a Quaffle between each other, and Marvolo just stood there, looking at them, before quietly leaving, and it twists at Sirius' heart.

"I have some things to do in London. Do you want to come along?"

"Magical or muggle?" Marvolo asks, rushing to his dresser.

"Muggle."

As he dresses, Sirius picks up the little drawing he made. It's of Padfoot, and it only makes Sirius sadder. And angrier, too.

"Where are you going?" Orion asks, running after Sirius and Marvolo when he sees them heading to the gates.

"I'm taking him to see that new broom prototype. The Firebolt," Sirius snaps.

"What? The *Firebolt*? I want to come-"

"No. Stay and play with your dear cousins, since you like them so much."

Orion blinks, first confused, and then quickly getting angry.

Little shit.

Sirius leads Marvolo away.

(-)

"Father, I appreciate you annoying Orion, but I don't really want to see the Firebolt. I don't like Quidditch that much, anyway, and I am happy with the Nimbus 2001," Marvolo says, when they Apparate into a London alley. A homeless muggle startles when he sees them, but before Sirius takes out his wand to Obliviate him, the man simply rubs at his eyes, frowns, and then takes another swing of a bottle, dismissing the whole thing.

"We're not going to see it. I don't think they worked enough on it to be presented yet. I have to meet the Muggle Prime Minister next month, and I need a muggle watch. I thought you'd like to help me pick one."

"Yes! I'll help you pick the best one, Father!"

“I didn’t like Quidditch that much, either, you know?” Sirius says, turning a corner leading into a much more presentable street.

“Weren’t you in the team, at Hogwarts?”

“I did it for James. He needed a Beater, and I figured I like hitting things, so why not?”

They spend hours between several jewellery stores, and Sirius would usually get annoyed at Marvolo for dragging him from one store to another, but today he doesn’t get annoyed, lets the boy look at everything closely and bother the staff until he almost makes them cry.

“I think this one is the best,” he finally says, seated with Sirius on a huge, gaudy, leather couch, several boxes of jewellery spread on a table before them, along with a glass of whiskey for Sirius and some fizzy drink for Marvolo, who wrinkles his nose at the taste but secretly enjoys it.

He makes Sirius try it on again, before he nods to himself, satisfied.

“And you’re sure you don’t want anything?”

Marvolo shakes his head. “Mother, Narcissa and Bianca would never let me live it down if I wear muggle jewellery. Mrs Rowle would have a stroke! A pity. They’re good at their craft, these muggles.”

“You can wear whatever you want, Marvolo. Don’t mind the girls.”

“Not worth the trouble, really. But, you know, this would look great on Orion’s new robe that Mother bought last week, the one with the silver trim!” He picks up some diamond cufflinks. “And no one admonishes him for anything, so he’d get away with it. Can we get them for him?”

Thank the gods for these new plastics the muggle invented, Sirius thinks as he pays. Marius let him know about it, when Sirius complained he has to carry so much muggle paper money around whenever they go to muggle places. He gave Sirius one of these ‘cards’ and Sirius makes sure to reimburse him whenever he visits his great uncle.

Arcturus and his father always told him that one day he’ll have to keep an eye on Marius, make sure he doesn’t reproduce, and after Arcturus died, Sirius took his place in this as well, dropping by to make sure there are no half-blood boys named Black running around.

It’s odd, having a basically muggle relative, but Marius is still such a Black, even if a squib. From what Sirius learned, he was the best in his field of work, envied and feared by all his neighbours, and the ladies sure like him a lot, even in his advanced age. But Marius kept his end of the deal, and he never sired children, even if he collected a handful of step sons and daughters, and those have children of their own, now all trying to get into Marius’ favour, to make sure they inherit his great fortune.

When they return home, Marvolo runs to Orion to give him the gift, and Sirius trails after him, throwing Orion a warning glare.

Orion's jaw twitches, but he takes the gift, thanks Marvolo for it, doesn't roll his eyes when Marvolo starts speaking about what robes will best match the cufflinks.

When dinner is ready, and everyone heads to the dining room, Sirius keeps Orion behind.

"Never shun your brother in front of strangers again," he orders.

"They're our cousins!"

Sirius grabs his shoulder. "Are they Blacks? No, they aren't."

"Neither is Draco, nor Harry," Orion spits back, wrenching himself away.

"Draco is the son of a Black woman," Sirius says. "And Harry grew up with us, he's ours. I mean it, Orion. Never scorn Marvolo again with foreigners around."

"Perhaps you'd like to talk to Mother and come up with a list of what you want of me! She told me to make sure our guests are having a great time, and I tried to include Marvolo, but five minutes in, he started muttering about rules, and then ran to Mother and Aunt Freya to tell them we were bothering the abraxans! And now somehow I'm at fault for everything! As always! Nothing I do is ever good enough for you!"

Orion stomps away, and Sirius lets him go, because if he makes a scene with Freya around, Astrid will be insufferable about it.

At least Orion, when he calms down, seems to be aware of how much he pissed Sirius off, so he's on his best behaviour for the rest of the visit, and makes sure Marvolo is included in all the activities.

(-)

"The muggle died," Bella says, as soon as she enters Sirius' room.

She's dressed strangely; the clothes are of obvious quality, but they aren't magical. Yet they don't look like what Sirius sees muggle wear, either.

"And you are sad about it?" he asks, making room for her in bed, lifting his blanket so she can sneak inside.

"I'm not sad, it's just that he was cleaning up the place, dealing with bugs and such."

"What happened to him?"

"The snake ate him. My lord says there was a misunderstanding, but to me it's pretty clear the snake blatantly disobeys him. I hope she eats Barty next- I can't stand him anymore. Merlin, that man has issues! He confessed his love to me-"

“No!”

“He came to me with some wilted flowers from the garden-”

“You have a garden?”

“Quite a sizeable one. And it was pretty, too, but now that the muggle’s dead, there’s no one to care for it, so the flowers started dying. Anyway, he came to my room with his fucking flowers, wearing a muggle suit he found in the home- an *old* muggle suit- and stammered that he loves me.”

Sirius is laughing so hard he thinks he’s going to crack a rib.

“Stop laughing, you knob!” Bella slaps him over the head.

“What did you do?!”

“I reminded him I’m married. He said he knows, and he doesn’t expect anything, he can love me ‘from afar’ as he apparently did his entire life, but he just wanted me to know.”

“He did always love you,” Sirius says. “That’s why he joined Voldemort. Because you recruited him.”

“How I regret now that I smiled at him that day! Anyway, I told him to shove the flowers up his arse and called him an idiot. But then I found him in my room, sniffing my robes, so I had to burn them all! I found these clothes in the attic! By this point, we’re all wearing dead people's clothes. The muggles were wealthy, clearly. At least there’s that.” She shivers. “No matter, I’ll get new robes tomorrow from Evy’s house, and this time I’ll curse my room not to allow Barty in. Not that he’ll be able to move for a while, mind you. I made sure of that. But even the torture he seemed to enjoy. The lunatic! My lord said I can’t kill him, so that’s why I am trying to tempt the snake into doing it.”

“How is *he* doing?” Sirius enquires. “Better?”

“He started reading, and he sits by the fireplace. He even slept there some nights, skipped the Apparitions. And he went into the village to get food. I refused to interact with the muggles, and we all agreed Barty cannot have any normal interactions with *anyone*, the muggle is dead, so my lord went in his stead.” She shrugs. “He’s more ….lively! I think I got through to him that Harry is, in fact, a Horcrux, though he claims he will need proof. I asked what proof will be sufficient, but he didn’t answer.”

If Voldemort finally accepts that, then hopefully they can move past it.

(-)

His Dark Mark burns right in the middle of dinner. It's a vicious burn, worse than it ever felt before. It never used to be this painful when Voldemort called him. It's so painful and unexpected that he drops his fork.

Everyone turns to stare at him, but he can hardly focus on maintaining a neutral expression, because he's suddenly a mess of nerves, anticipation, happiness, and every other feeling in between.

It can't be a coincidence this is happening on Harry's first day back from Hogwarts.

Sirius stands, mumbles about having forgotten to do something, and hastily leaves the kitchen.

He stops in the hallway, trying to clear his head, to process it all, but the Mark burns again, distracting him.

Sirius cannot wait to see him, but he prepares himself for something unpleasant. At least he *intends* to prepare himself for something bad, yet what he does instead is hurry to the mirror and check his reflection.

His hair has grown a little, enough that Sirius can tuck some strands behind his ears-

The Mark burns once more, and this time the pain doesn't fade, remains constant, Voldemort's patience probably running thin.

So Sirius Apparates, lets the Mark pull him to Voldemort.

In the blink of an eye, he finds himself on the street. The street where Grimmauld is, to be precise. Sirius can see his house.

"I hope I ruined your dinner."

Sirius turns to his right, and he finds it difficult to swallow, mouth going dry.

Voldemort is wearing his old glamour that he used in public, back in Paris, or when he came to free Sirius from that muggle police station.

He wanted to see Voldemort, not the glamour. Yet it's still Voldemort, so Sirius' chest feels warmer than it's been in quite some time, and if he's not careful, he might even smile.

But he is no longer twenty, he reminds himself, so he keeps his expression in check.

"Not really," he answers.

Don't antagonise him!

The brown eyes, familiar by now to Sirius after his experiences with Tom from the Ring and the nightmares he still has of that boy, are just as capable of staring straight into Sirius' soul, with the same intensity of the non glamoured eyes.

A group of muggle tourists passes them by, but they pay them no mind.

“Bella insists Potter speaks Parseltongue,” Voldemort says, after a handful of seconds.

“He does.”

“Yet she has never heard him speak it.”

Be patient.

“That’s because I prohibited him from doing it; I wouldn’t want that information to reach Dumbledore, so no one else knows. But I have heard him-”

“You wouldn’t know what it is. He could speak gibberish for all you know.”

Patience, Sirius reminds himself, though he wants to slap Voldemort.

He wants to kiss him, grab him, pull him close.

He wants this man *so* badly, it hurts him, it makes his hands itch with need.

He still cannot believe he gets to look at him again, to breathe the same air.

A sudden burst of joy explodes inside him, as it often does these days, every other moment, when it dawns on him that Voldemort is back.

“The ring recognised it. It translated for me.”

Voldemort blinks at him. A curious expression graces his features, for all but a second, before it returns to the hostile intensity from before.

“I didn’t lie to Bella. He speaks-”

“Perhaps the Horcrux lied to you,” Voldemort says.

“You can look,” Sirius gestures at his head, inviting him to use Legilimency.

“No.” Voldemort is so quick in rejecting the offer, Sirius doesn’t know what to make of it.

Why not? He could look, have confirmation for it, and for everything else. He would finally understand Sirius isn’t plotting against him.

“What would convince you, then?”

“I wish to hear him speak it. Nothing else would convince me.”

Tiny snowflakes start falling from the sky, melting mid air, transforming into rain before they touch the ground.

Miserable weather, yet nothing is miserable around Voldemort.

The street, the pathetic snow, even the occasional muggle passing by is made more beautiful by his presence.

Sirius knew it would come to this. In her last visit, Bella, finally dressed in her own clothes again, alluded that Voldemort might want to check Harry's Horcrux given powers personally.

"He must know it. Surely he understood, put the pieces together. Yet he hides behind silly excuses. He must have proof, beyond doubt, before he admits he was wrong."

"Alright."

Voldemort is taken aback by this swift agreement. His eyes narrow, suspicious.

"I'll go get him," Sirius says. *It's night time,* he almost says, to make sure Voldemort will behave himself.

But there's no need for it. Bella was right. Voldemort knows. He *must* know, deep down, that Harry is a Horcrux and neither Sirius, nor Bella are lying to him.

If he came here to speak to Sirius, he knows already, only he refuses to believe it, wants to cling to his paranoia.

He won't attack Harry. Not before checking, at least.

"You will get him," Voldemort repeats slowly, unbelieving.

"If that will convince you…" Sirius shrugs. *It's night outside*, he thinks again, more so to reassure himself than to warn Voldemort. *We're standing under the stars.* "Oh, he can't speak it unless he sees a snake, or a snake speaks to him first-he doesn't realise when he's speaking it, either, he thinks it's English-"

"That's not how it works-"

"It's how it works with him," Sirius cuts over Voldemort. "Because it's not Harry that speaks it, but the piece of your magic stuck inside him."

Voldemort opens his mouth again, but Sirius starts walking. "Wait here," he says. "I'll be right back."

(-)

Orion and Marvolo throw a tantrum when Sirius only takes Harry to walk Snuffles.

"We want to come, too! We missed Harry!" Marvolo says.

Orion glares at Sirius, but only for a second. Most worryingly, he turns to glare at Harry, next. However, Sirius doesn't have the mindset or the time to deal with petty jealousy, so he sends his sons to their rooms and takes Harry and Snuffles to the hallway.

Harry chatters away, something about Hermione having a crush on Lockhart, but Sirius isn't listening, heart pounding.

When he opens the door, he'd like to take Harry's hand, only Harry would never allow that.

It's useless anyway. Holding his hand won't protect him.

The stars will, Sirius reminds himself, as they cross the threshold, and he casts a discrete charm at Snuffles.

Sorry, boy.

Sirius knows dogs. There's no way Snuffles won't start barking in warning as soon as he senses Voldemort around, so Sirius makes him very calm.

Harry doesn't notice that Snuffles isn't his usual self, doesn't pull on his leash quite as enthusiastically as he usually does.

He's busy with his story, sounding annoyed at Hermione.

"It's so embarrassing, really. You'd have to be brain dead to like Lockhart! And if Hermione has anything, she has brains! I don't understand it!"

Here we go. They're heading straight for Voldemort, who waits on the other side of the street.

Sirius has the impulse to grab Harry's hand again, but he just places himself on Harry's other side, so he can stand between him and Voldemort.

He can't even hear Harry anymore, he can only hear his heartbeat.

Lightning strikes in the distance, unexpectedly, the tentative snowfall is gone, and rain starts pouring, no pretence at snow-

"What the fuck?" Harry asks, looking in the distance at another lightning strike. "Sorry, I mean, what is going on? We should head back, it's a downpour-"

"Afraid of rain?" Sirius hears himself asking. "We'll just take him to those bushes then." He casts a charm to protect Harry from getting wet, and tries to control himself, so the storm won't worsen.

But it does worsen, because Sirius can't calm himself down, the more they approach Voldemort. Or where Voldemort was, a second ago.

Sirius blinks, and then Voldemort is on Harry's side, and he knocks into him, lightly.

Before Sirius can do anything, Voldemort hisses.

And Harry hisses back.

Voldemort's face is an explosion of shock, and he hisses again.

Harry doesn't look scared, nor as if anything is amiss. He looks apologetic, as he hisses, too, gestures to the sky, and laughs awkwardly.

Sirius grabs his shoulder, leading him back to the house. "What was that about? Couldn't hear a word with the thunder."

"What?" Harry yells. "Oh, it was nothing, he was just an arse, snapped at me to watch where I'm going. I told him I can't see shit- sorry, I said I can't see anything in this storm. Gods, what is going on with the weather?"

"Go on, I'll be right back," Sirius says, when they reach the door, and pushes Harry inside Grimmauld, Snuffles running after him.

"It was nothing!" Harry complains. "Bloke just knocked into me, it's fine, stop being so overprotective-"

Sirius slams the door in his face.

The storm calms down instantly, back to a drizzle.

Voldemort is where they left him, in the middle of the street, still looking shocked. And wet.

A few strands of hair are plastered to his face, and Sirius wants to-

"So?" He asks, when he reaches him. "Convinced?"

Voldemort says nothing.

"He's also getting odd headaches, says he feels anger out of nowhere." And fear. And loneliness. And nightmares about Albania, where he was trying to call Sirius' name.

But he won't say that. Anger is something Voldemort can accept feeling. The rest, not so much.

"He got those headaches and bouts of anger when you were possessing Quirrell, too. It's probably a…I don't know, a connection between you. He never experienced anything like that before you…returned."

"I see." Voldemort still looks thrown off, but at least he's making an effort to hide it now.

Sirius wants to kiss him so badly.

The rain is gone, the clouds dissipate.

"So you will stop trying to kill him, yes?"

"You can't send him back to Hogwarts. Not with Dumbledore there-"

Sirius rolls his eyes. Now he wants to protect Harry, after everything?

Well, of course he does, it's a piece of his soul, another key to immortality.

Voldemort always said seven is the most powerful magical number, argued with Sirius, who stood by his choice that three is the most potent number.

And now, with Harry, the unexpected Horcux, Voldemort's soul is split into seven pieces.

He must like that.

"Dumbledore doesn't know it. It's sort of a hard guess to make, you know? Even if he knew, Dumbledore would never hurt a child-"

"He would, if it meant hurting me!"

"Stop. We had this talk before, years ago, when I begged you to ignore the prophecy. You were wrong, I was right. I *am* right. Dumbledore would never intentionally harm a child. And he does not know. *You* didn't know! How do you think he would have figured it out? I only learned because the Ring spelled it out for me; because I know Harry is a Parselmouth. Dumbledore doesn't have this knowledge, nor one of your Horcruxes on hand. Hopefully, that is. I know you hid one in Hogwarts, but I assume it's in your Secret Chamber, so I doubt Dumbledore can reach it."

Voldemort opens his mouth, closes it again. He glares at Sirius.

"If you want, I can retrieve it for you, alright? So it won't share a castle with Dumbledore-"

"He'll never find it."

Gods, he still thinks himself smarter than anyone- well, he *is*, but he's terrible at hiding Horcruxes, really. But whatever. It is what it is.

"You won't hurt Harry, yes? The prophecy meant nothing; you only turned it into something because you acted on it, you understand now?"

"He destroyed me-"

"Because you tried to spare Lily," Sirius explains. "You did, didn't you? You gave her a choice to live, but she chose to sacrifice her life for her son. It was her, it was that sacrifice that destroyed you, not Harry. It's that protection, that blood protection still running through his veins that destroyed Quirrell's body when you tried to use the idiot to touch Harry."

Voldemort frowns.

"It is dark magic. Blood magic. You know that, you know what it means to sacrifice a life, what power it holds."

"She didn't do-"

“Mum says it’s something mothers can do. You don’t need to perform a ritual or cast a spell. It’s just the act of sacrificing one’s life for one’s child, and it’s enough. He isn’t your equal, he’s just a kid, he was only a baby. Lily wasn’t your equal. *No one* is. You simply failed to take this powerful sacrifice into account when you cast the cast the Killing Curse at Harry. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, but it’s never too late to step back from it. Let it go, and it won’t matter. He’s just a boy, he’s not your enemy,” Sirius begs. “And now, because despite Lily, despite the blood protection, despite dark magic trying to stop you, somehow you *still* managed to turn it to your advantage. You turned the boy you thought would destroy you into a living container for your soul! You made your supposed enemy a key in keeping you immortal. Quit while you’re ahead, really. Just let it go. The prophecy means nothing; it never meant anything. Only you gave it importance and now you can take it away.”

They stare at each other for a handful of moments.

Gods, he’s *alive*! He’s back! He’s so close. Sirius feels alive, and it’s wonderful.

They were dead together all these years. Neither was truly dead, yet they lived empty lives, apart from each other.

“*Master needs his mate to heal him,”* Tessuth once said. *“If Master was Elven, only his mate could cure him.”*

Sirius is not Elven, certainly, and yet he fancies that Tessuth was right.

He truly did feel he was missing a vital part of him.

“I won’t attack the boy,” Voldemort finally decides.

If only he’d have said this a decade ago…

I wouldn’t have my sons, Sirius thinks, so he won’t get angry at Voldemort, at all the pain he put Sirius in, unnecessarily.

He lost James because Voldemort wanted Harry dead, but he gained three sons.

“And I will keep him safe,” Sirius says. “As I did all these years. As I kept all your Horcruxes safe, at least the ones I could reach.”

Voldemort steps back, face closes off, all expressions hidden. “You seemed upset, last we talked, that I gave a Horcrux to Bella, and one to Lucius. You said you mustn’t have been so special, after all, if you weren’t the only one to get one.”

“I remember.” Sirius was a tad dramatic.

“It wasn’t the same as with Bella and Lucius. You were special.”

And then he dissolves into thin air, leaving Sirius alone on the street.

It starts raining again, heavily.

(-)

Draco and Harry are in a fight, so Harry doesn't want to go to Malfoy manor for the third day of Yule.

"He called Hermione a mudblood! And when I defended her, he called me a blood traitor!"

"Should I remind you that you used to call muggleborns that only a year ago?" Sirius asks.

"I never called anyone that to their faces! I never said it intending to hurt someone! And now I know better, and I asked Draco not to say it to Hermione! I don't expect them to be friends or anything, that's fine, but can't he just ignore her? He called me a blood traitor!"

Sirius sighs. He pats Harry on the shoulder. "Listen, kid. You have to accept that you are a blood traitor, by their standards-"

"But-"

"You know the rules. It's stupid, yes, but it's how they are. I was called a blood traitor, too. They only stopped because they're too afraid of me to say it, but you best believe many still consider me a blood traitor. You can't let it bother you. If Draco or the others call you a blood traitor again, just say *'yes, and?'*"

"I don't mind it from anyone else, but it's Draco! He's my best friend!"

"Regulus called me a blood traitor, and he's my *brother*. It's how they are," Sirius repeats. "And I suspect Draco is only lashing out because he's jealous. You used to be inseparable, and now you have new friends, and he's hurt by it."

"I don't want my best friend calling me a blood traitor!"

Then don't befriend muggleborns, Sirius almost says. "Wear it like a badge of honour. Like your father did. He not only befriended muggleborns, he married one, and he didn't give a shit about what anyone said."

Harry bites his lip. "Yes, but his best friend didn't insult him or Lily! Draco, however-"

Sirius sighs. He cups Harry's cheek. "I did insult Lily. My last word to her was 'mudblood', and it's why I haven't said it since then."

Harry deflates. "*Oh.* Oh, Sirius," he says, like he's sorry for how Sirius feels about it, and not for his mother, that had to hear it.

"Before that, I often used that word in a rage, just to hurt others. It's such a ready, easy insult, one that is meant to cut deep, and when I was angry…well."

“And how did James react?” Harry asks.

“For a long time, he’d just correct me, remind me that’s not alright. As we grew older, he’d get more and more upset if I slipped up. But when I said it to Lily, James understood it was said in anger, because I was afraid of what would happen to you and him, and Lily; because I was mad she wouldn’t let me be their Secret Keeper. He forgave me.”

When Sirius takes his family to Malfoy Manor, Harry forgives Draco, after they talk in whispers, further away from the rest.

They have a nice time, all the children getting along for once, laughing and running around the beautiful decorated manor, and the breathtaking grounds, filled with winter wonders.

Narcissa, Astrid, Andromeda, Isadora, Evy and Bianca gossip together animatedly.

Sirius’ mum and Abraxas are bullying Druella a little further away, and Dora sits with Regulus, Lucius and Sirius, telling them stories of dragons and her adventures in Romania.

Bella is missing, but only the children question it, no one else.

“She’s sick,” Sirius has been telling them for weeks now.

Before they leave, Sirius takes Draco aside, tells him to mind his words with Harry, if he doesn’t want to lose him.

Lucius, who followed after them, stays silent.

“He always talked to muggleborns,” Sirius reminds Draco. “My sons, too. Are you going to call them blood traitors?”

Draco shakes his head. “It’s different! You forced them to talk to Viviene and Anne! They didn’t choose it for themselves. But Harry actually likes Granger! I don’t understand why! She’s horrible! All she does is complain about everything, and correct everyone! She’s been in my world for a year and a half, and she corrects *me*?! And then she said Father bought me my place on the Quidditch team!”

“Well, he did.”

Draco waves it away. “I fly well, regardless! I would have made the team! How dare she speak of Quidditch, when she doesn’t even understand Quidditch, doesn’t even like it? It took her seven tries in our first Flying Class to get the broom to fly into her hand!” Draco goes all red with righteous indignation.

“I get it, she’s annoying and thinks she knows everything because she’s a bookworm-”

“YES!” Draco yells, validated.

“However, you’re not hurting her when you antagonise her. Or not only her. You’re hurting Harry,” Sirius explains.

“And he’s hurting me, by siding with her!”

“Just ignore her! Pretend she doesn’t exist. I guarantee you, that will hurt her worse, but it won’t piss Harry off. Win-win!”

Draco frowns.

“If you really want to upset her,” Lucius speaks, coming closer, putting a hand over Draco’s shoulder, “befriend the Weasley boy, steal all her friends from her.”

“But he’s poor. He’s a Weasley!” Draco scrunches up his nose. “And he doesn’t like me.”

“Yes,” Lucius agrees, “but if you talk to him and Harry about Quidditch, about wizarding things, then the mudblood will feel excluded. Also, Arthur Weasley will lose his mind when he learns his son is hanging out with a Malfoy. Imagine- his spawn singing you praise back home! It will cause fights in that silly household. Why don’t you gift Ron your old Nimbus 2000, huh? That will make him like you. Play Quidditch with him and Harry; the mudblood can’t do that, you said she doesn’t fly well.”

Draco nods.

“Pay attention to the boy, I’m sure no one else does, what with his one hundred siblings. Share your sweets with him, his parents certainly can’t afford to send him sweets. He’ll adore you in no time. But do try to keep the ‘blood traitor’ thing to yourself around Harry and Weasley.”

“But he-”

“I know he is a blood traitor. However, sometimes we have to put up with these people, yes? He’s still a pureblood, of an old line. He was just raised wrong, not his fault, the poor lad. He doesn’t know any better. And it will really upset the mudblood, yes?”

Draco grins.

Sirius sighs, turns to stare at Lucius.

“What?” Lucius asks. “Our goal here was to make sure Harry and Draco are fine.”

“Yeah, but that could be accomplished without plotting how to hurt Hermione and Ron. Two little *children*.”

Lucius sneers. “What do I care about them? Someone will always get hurt when you mix mudbloods with purebloods. I told you this, repeatedly. I told you to raise Harry with our values, but you didn’t listen. Now I have to mitigate the harm you caused.”

He’s not talking about Harry and Draco and their schoolyard problems anymore.

“I was summoned last night,” Lucius said, two days after Voldemort met Harry.

There is no expression on Lucius' face, no indication of how he's feeling. The mask is firmly back in place, cold as marble, after eleven years. Lucius needs to be on top of his game, constantly vigilant, careful with his words.

"I cannot and will not speak more about it. But I wanted you to know of my position."

He now has to mitigate the harm Sirius caused when he brought Voldemort back.

Sirius looks away, because he feels so guilty when he allows himself to think how much he fucked Lucius over.

(-)

Avery says nothing about it to Sirius, but he laughs less, deeper and deeper circles under his eyes every time Sirius sees him.

Parkinson won't meet Sirius' gaze.

Nott doesn't stop over for drinks at Grimmauld when he's in London.

And Astrid says Corban's wife told her Corban is so out of sorts lately that both she and Corban's mistress are at wits' end on how to make him feel better.

Goyle's wife tells Astrid her husband suffered a mysterious injury and has been bed bound for days, but refuses to say who hurt him.

He hears, soon after, that Corban sent both his eldest son abroad, on a tour of Europe, and he's also planning on sending his daughter and his son-in-law away to Germany.

"Did he threaten to hurt your family?" Sirius asks him, going to the Yaxley London townhouse.

"No." At least Corban seems willing to talk to Sirius about Voldemort, unlike the others. "However, it's best to be proactive. I meant to speak to you, Sirius. About Regulus. He's walking around calling the dark lord a half-blood. *Loudly*."

Sirius sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose. "He's not lying."

"You don't understand how furious the dark lord is. He still shows a smidgeon of restraint with a handful of us from the Twenty Eight, but you should see how he treats the others. He won't forgive nor forget that we abandoned him. Regulus is playing with fire. Tell him to stop."

It's hard getting hold of Regulus these days. He moved to his home in Scotland, and he's avoiding Sirius.

Unlike the others, Regulus wasn't called to serve Voldemort again, he's not stressed or made to suffer Voldemort's reproaches.

No, Sirius thinks he knows why his brother avoids him.

Still, he summons him to Grimmauld, with a very official letter, and Regulus was always dutiful, so he shows up.

"I hear you are speaking of things better left unsaid. Stop it."

"Why? We like half-bloods these days, don't we? You made all of us like Harry and Nymphadora. It is no longer an insult to call someone a half-blood, is it?"

"Stop it, Regulus. I mean it."

"Did you bring him back? Is it true?" His voice slips into anger, barely restrained.

"Yes," Sirius admits.

Regulus pins him with their father's cold, harsh glare. "And did you sleep with him, back in the war? Is that true as well?"

Sirius takes a second too long to answer, so his brother goes on.

"I heard some rumours, back then, but Avery was drunk, and there were rumours about Bella, too, so I just ignored them. Yet now I can no longer ignore it. Is it true?"

"Yes."

Regulus sneers at him, disgust all over his features.

And it's not because Voldemort is a half-blood. Regulus always knew Sirius fucked anything, even muggles, and while his brother made faces at it, he never cared too much about the blood status of Sirius' many lovers.

No. It's because Voldemort is a man.

Regulus leaves without another word.

Sirius goes to his mother, because he feels like shit, like he fucked up and made everyone around him miserable, and he wants her to yell at him for it, because no one else would dare berate him and tell him he deserves to suffer.

He finds her reading in the parlour, and he throws himself into the armchair facing her.

"I brought him back," he announces. "Voldemort."

She doesn't even look up from her book. "I figured it was you."

"Go on, let me know what you think about it."

She turns a page. “I’m surprised it took you so long. I thought he was permanently dead, but now that he’s obviously alive, I am shocked you left him to rot for a decade.”

Great. She is making him feel like shit, only not in the way he intended.

Fuck, even Mother thinks ten years was too much. No wonder Voldemort wants nothing to do with me.

“You were special,” he told Sirius.

Were.

“You hate me,” he needles her. “I remember how scared you were of him during the war, and I didn’t give a fuck, just brought him back.”

She sighs. Puts down her book. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“Please, you were terrified!”

And Sirius remembers how mad it made him, to see his mum scared of a half-blood.

Gods, how things changed.

“I *was*, yes. For a short period of time. I never was afraid of him before your father died, but after he left us, and Father was in France, and Arcturus weak with grief for Orion….yes, I was scared. But I have you, now. Nothing frightens me anymore. I know you will take care of all of us, the way your father did. More so, even.” She tilts her head to the side, and her left eyebrow rises slightly. “You’re more like Old Sirius than Orion. Every year, you resemble him more and more. I know you won’t allow any harm to come to this family.”

She picks her book up again. “I hate Riddle, always did. Not just because he’s a mudblood, half-blood, whatever abomination. He’s simply obnoxious. I despise him for branding Regulus, for hurting you. And yet, for months now, your eyes have come alive. You played the piano with your son, for the first time ever. You allow us to use the gramophone.” She opens her book, and looks away from Sirius. “Most people won’t understand, but I do. Orion hurt me all his life, but if I had the means to bring him back, I would. And I wouldn’t have waited ten years for it. You’re more vengeful than I thought you.”

Sirius doesn’t even know what to say. He came to her to get punishment, but he got absolution, instead. She made him feel *better*. She truly is the only one to understand, it seems.

It’s why they always fight so fiercely. They are simply too similar, always have been.

“If you brought Father back, you wouldn’t be able to visit Malfoy manor as often,” Sirius says.

She rolls her eyes. “If Orion was back, I wouldn’t *want* to visit Malfoy manor at all.”

It makes Sirius laugh, and she smiles, too, before focusing properly on her book, a newly published vampire novel.

They fell out of fashion, years ago, apparently no one was interested anymore, but Sirius sent Rita a lot of gold, more than any article would bring her and asked her if she'd like to write fiction, since she always did, because her articles were often more fiction than reality.

His mother loves the books. Rita, despite her many flaws, was always gifted with a quill, and she always had a wonderful imagination.

(-)

Dear Sirius,

I'm mortified! Ron's sister has a crush on me, and she sent me this singing Valentine card! A cupid (stupid Lockhart, I hate him so much!) brought it to me in the middle of the hallway. Everyone heard it! I don't know what to do!

Should I avoid her now? That is what I want, but Cissa would say it's not polite. Should I talk to her and tell her I am not interested? Should I just not acknowledge the letter, and act normal? Draco says to pretend it never happened, and poor Ron is as embarrassed as I am!

In better news, Ron and Draco are getting along. Somewhat. I am happy Draco is trying! He even gave Ron his old Nimbus! I don't know why I didn't think to do that! Ron is still suspicious, you know, what with their family feud, but I talked to him and asked him to give Draco a chance. It helps that Draco stopped calling Hermione names! It makes me so happy! You were right, I just had to talk to him and have patience.

Oh, Orion sent Lavender chocolates and a rose. She boasted about it the entire day, telling everyone that would listen that 'the Black heir' sent her a gift. She's unbearable. She says Orion is adorable, but she thinks he's a 'baby'. Hermione says she's a vain airhead, and I think I agree.

There's this pretty girl in Ravenclaw, Cho Chang, she's a Seeker, too, but she's one year older than me, and, I dunno, I think she maybe will see me as a 'baby' too, so I decided against sending her a gift. Maybe next year.

With love,

Harry

(-)

His mother joins the circle, dressed in black, as always, with only a golden silk thread woven into her hair, pulled back, the way she wore it for close to two decades now.

As a mother, she should wear all gold, like all the women in her circle, but she refuses to wear any colour, even for Beltane.

Druella is all in gold, beside her. Druella wore full black for a full year after Cygnus died, but then left her mourning behind.

Astrid looks gorgeous in gold, Sirius always thought so, and Orion, standing at Sirius side, mutters, “Mother is so beautiful!”

“The most beautiful,” Marvolo agrees.

Sirius smiles, knows this is perhaps the last year the boys will look at the circle of Mothers with innocent adoration. He imagines the next one, their eyes will steer towards the Maiden circle, where the young girls dance dressed in white gowns, hair free.

When he was a young child, Sirius too, watched his mother, back then dressed in gold, and felt so blessed by the gods to have given him such a perfect mother.

But then, one year, she refused to bless him, passed him right by, and since then, Sirius never watched her again. It was Bella that blessed him that year, and all the years that came after.

And it is Bella he’s been watching, ever since.

She’s dressed in silver, in her own circle of married women, but not yet mothers.

She’s leading the entire ritual, has been leading it since his father died and his mother refused to be in charge anymore, Sirius was told.

Every family has their own rituals for Beltane, but they all agree the Black led ones are the strongest. *‘The stars shine brightest for the Blacks’,* people whisper.

It is true. Sirius felt the power growing considerably once Narcissa and his mother joined the circle.

He felt the power settling over them, potent, once Bella joined.

It is beautiful, watching the girls and women chant and dance around the fires. It is powerful, when the magic settles into the earth, expands, blessing the earth for miles and miles.

They hold the ritual at Malfoy Manor, because Black Manor is secluded, with no muggles anywhere around.

But in Wiltshire, Malfoy Manor is not far from the muggle farming villages, and their crops are always blessed, always growing healthy.

All land the Malfoys own, of course, had owned since the middle ages.

Sirius remembers Lily telling him muggles used to blame witches when there was a draught, when famine plagued their lands, crops withering under their gaze.

Most likely, it was a pissed of witch.

It amuses him.

The chanting from the women starts having an echo, voices long ago forgotten, no longer from this realm joining in. They chant, and chant, even after the witches stop singing and gather together, all three circles, to spill some animal blood into a cauldron.

As the stars fade from the sky, Bella fills a cup with blood, and comes to Sirius.

Ever since she was thirteen years old, she was the one to bless him, and she was clear she will continue to do it, when she informed Astrid of it, long ago.

Bella draws a long, bloody line on Sirius' cheek, and Sirius feels the power in it wash over him, the magic embracing him, warm and safe.

Bella's eyes spark with power, with magic, her hair wild around her, her silver gown stained with red.

Astrid comes after Bella, does the same to Orion, Marvolo and little Helix, sleeping peacefully in Sirius' arms, unbothered by the singing or the magic all around him, stirring only slightly when Astrid gently trails her fingers over his forehead.

Sirius watches his mother and Narcissa making their way further to the right.

Cissa stops to bless Lucius, eyes just as wild as Bella, stars dancing inside them, hair just as disheveled; the only time someone will catch her with her hair unstyled. Only dried flowers and fresh leaves dangle from it, no product, no perfume.

Sirius' mother stops in front of Abraxas, as she has done for a handful of years, now.

Regulus twitches at Sirius' other side, even if his eyes are on his wife, now blessing Elara, he still must sense what their mother is doing.

She always drew a single line, on his father's forehead, between his eyes, down his nose. Even after she cruelly stopped blessing Sirius, she never stopped with her husband. They could be in the biggest fight, not talking for weeks, but on Beltane, she would always give him her blessing, ask their gods, ask magic, the stars and moon to look at him favourably.

Black women only give their blessing to family, and only family, it was known.

But Sirius remembers the year after Lucius' mother died. He barely remembers the woman, a nymph like creature of great, ethereal beauty, but he remembers the Beltane festivities after her death, when his own mother, after blessing his father and Regulus, has moved down the line and gently caressed Lucius' face.

All the women did the same, that night, one after the other, they went to that motherless boy, and gave him their blessings, their love and attention, and Lucius' tears, the only ones he ever shed in public, left a path on his cheek, over all that blood. No one blessed Abraxas, since then.

Until his mother did it some five years ago. Or was it six?

Sirius tries to ignore it, as he always tried to ignore whatever is happening there, as he pretends not to wonder where his mother disappears sometimes, or he doesn't question why she suddenly started going to parties again, and why she's always sitting beside Abraxas.

"They're just old friends," he told Regulus, when Regulus was raging about it, years ago.

"She never had a friend in her life! She's shaming our family! Our father's memory! Do something!"

But Sirius did nothing, and he does not think of it too much.

Sirius knows loneliness, knows how empty one is without the man that means the world to them.

So he keeps his gaze on Bella, and wonders instead if Voldemort ever participated in a Beltane ritual.

If anyone ever invited him. Not in Britain, that certainly never happened, but perhaps on his journeys?

He wonders how Tom would have grown up, if, when he was an orphan boy, instead of being cruelly mistreated by muggles, he'd have been like Lucius, embraced by all the witches that pitied a motherless boy, that showed him their favour, reminded him he's not alone, even if he suffered such a loss.

Of course, back then, Sirius didn't find it beautiful, didn't appreciate their tight community and how they gathered behind Lucius. No, back then Sirius hated it, burned with pain and jealousy, because his mother bypassed her own son, but went to the good, obedient, perfect little blond.

He remembers looking up at his father, so upset, trying not to cry, and he saw the flash of anger in those cold eyes, but even back then, Sirius knew his father will soon forgive his mother for what she did, like he forgave her anything, the moment she gave him a smile.

He remembers Bella's soft hands curling around his jaw, and how she smiled at him, smeared blood on her lips and kissed his forehead with them.

His gaze finds her now, as she puts down the fires, the ritual over, and he feels as grateful to have her as he did way back then.

He looks at Astrid, cooing over Orion, Marvolo and Helix, and he's happy his sons have a good mother. He hopes he's a good father, too.

When he puts the kids to bed, he tells them he loves them. He thinks he forgot to tell them in a while, since they've grown bigger.

Orion rolls his eyes, but there's a pleased smile on his face, and Marvolo asks him 'how much?'.

Helix sleeps with Sirius that morning, tucked away in his arms, soft, content and so very safe.

Grimmauld, always connected with Sirius, lets him know his mother only returns home from Malfoy manor late in the afternoon.

His father would be so mad! Sirius can't even imagine it. So he doesn't. He thinks of Voldemort, and how funny he'd find it. He wants to tell him, as he found himself wanting to tell Voldemort so many things, over so many years.

And he's alive now, he's around, and yet Sirius can't reach him.

"Patience," Bella tells him, whenever she can get away from Voldemort to come visit Sirius. *Patience.* Yet he's running out of it.

(-)

"Everything feels…tense," Harry says, in the first week of his summer holiday. "Like something is in the air."

"Don't worry about it. Politics." Sirius pats his shoulder. "Does your scar still bother you?"

Harry shakes his head. "No. Not at all. It stopped suddenly, like I told you."

Sirius did ask, often, in most of his letters. Now that he's aware of the connection, Voldemort is surely using Occlumency to stop it.

"Can Ron and Hermione come over to visit me? Maybe spend a night or two?"

"Of course." Sirius smiles at him, already mentally preparing for the headaches he'll get when he'll inform Astrid and his mother about a muggleborn coming to Grimmauld.

Turns out, Ron's parents don't want Ron to visit. It is no surprise to Sirius, but his mother gets so terribly insulted when she finds out that a Weasley, of all people, declined an invitation to their home, she even forgets to be mad about the muggleborn.

Hermione, when she arrives, is aggravating and almost faints in ecstasy when she sees the huge library.

It's a good thing Regulus still isn't speaking to Sirius, unless Sirius orders it, because he'd have a heart attack to see Hermione in their ancestral home.

Astrid leaves for Norway with their sons, a day before Hermione is set to arrive.

“Grandma is sort of crazy,” Sirius hears Harry telling Hermione. “You most likely won’t see her much, but in case you do, don’t mind her! People say she’s scary, and she yells a lot, says a lot of nonsense, but just ignore her, yes? She won’t hurt you.”

Thankfully, mindful of Sirius’ warnings, his mother doesn’t do anything too terrible, just scowling at Hermione in the dark hallways, and ordering Kreacher to ‘sanitise’ everything the girl touches.

Kreacher, who has been ordered to keep his mouth shut for Hermione’s entire stay, trails after her with a rag at the ready.

Dobby likes Hermione, and Hermione likes Dobby, but she takes issues with owning house-elves, and she comes to discuss it with Sirius.

It makes him laugh; not many people dare approach him, yet this slip of a girl scolds him in his own home about the morality of owning house-elves.

“You’re a smart girl,” Sirius tells her. “Let me give you a piece of advice; if you want to fit in this world, it’s best not to challenge its customs.”

She raises her chin, throws her untameable hair over her shoulder, and says, “I will always speak against injustice! I care nothing for fitting in!”

It only endears her more to Sirius, but it makes him pity her, too, because he’d seen their world eat up people like her, time and time again.

“I know she’s annoying,” Harry whispers, embarrassed, as they watch Hermione cooking for herself- or attempting to- because she refuses to eat the ‘products of forced labour’. “But she’s a really good friend, I promise! She just has some…oddities.”

When Dobby tells her to stop being silly, that she’s been fed by house-elves at Hogwarts for two years already, the girl goes white with shock; it reminds Sirius of Lily, who took a long time to figure out who was making her food at the school.

She goes on about starting a program to free house-elves, a muggle pen in her hand as she scribbles furiously on a piece of parchment.

“Imagine if Tessuth was alive to hear this,” Harry says, with a shudder. “She’d take a sword to Hermione.”

Sirius laughs, yet he feels a pang of…something, remembering the old elf. He thinks of her, from time to time, when he walks past the stairs and glimpses her head.

He thinks she died free.

He wishes she was there, to tell Hermione of an era lost to history, of free elves and evergreen forests.

(-)

“Why can’t I go to Ron’s?” Harry asks, upset. “I get his mom doesn’t want him here because our family has a- well, an *interesting* reputation, but why can’t I go there?”

“Because I say so,” Sirius states, so he won’t say something scathing like ‘they live on top of each other, like chickens, they won’t even have a room for you’ or ‘you’ll come back with fleas’.

By now, Sirius is convinced that Voldemort abandoned his plans of killing Harry. *“He still wants to hear the prophecy, in full,”* Bella said last they saw each other. *“But otherwise, I think we’re safe.”*

Still, Sirius would rather have competent people watching over Harry when he’s not there. Not to protect him from Voldemort, but just from the inherent danger of living in their world, especially in a home with twenty magical children or however many Weasleys there are, all carrying wands. He simply does not trust the two adults to handle any emergency.

And, of course, it’s the fact that the Weasleys dislike the Blacks. It’s fine for the children, Sirius would never judge a child for any opinion they hold. But it’s one thing for Harry to be friendly with children that don’t think favourably of the Black family, and it’s another thing for Harry to grow close to adults that share those beliefs.

Harry runs to his room, slams the door behind him and ignores Sirius for three days straight.

Ah, the famed adolescent temper.

(-)

“Master!” Kreacher wakes him up. “Master, urgent summon from the Ministry!”

Sirius gets up, dazed. It’s not even four in the morning, and he had only gone to sleep some half an hour before.

Kreacher helps him get ready in record time.

In the Ministry Atrium, he gets out of the Floo at the same time Lucius gets out of another.

They can’t speak, not openly, since many others are coming in, wondering what is it all about.

Sirius sort of guessed, because Bella seemed thrilled last he saw her, a week ago, yet still, when they enter the Wizengamot Chamber, and he sees Fudge and some Aurors in a frenzy, he gets a shiver down his spine.

“The imprisoned Death Eaters escaped,” Fudge says, in shock, even his lips trembling.

Lucius clearly knew this was about to happen. He has no reaction, but Sirius has long learned how to read the minuscule signs in his friend, and this is obviously not a surprise for him.

“Where is Scrimgeour?” Amelia Bones demands, looking around for the Head Auror.

“He’s on the island,” someone else answers.

Fudge has to repeat himself, constantly, as new people come in. Even then, most refuse to believe it, looking around as if expecting someone would announce it’s all a prank.

Corban keeps shaking his head in apparent disbelief, though Sirius is certain he knew beforehand, like Lucius.

They all knew. All but me.

Fudge doesn’t have more information, the situation ‘ongoing’, though Shacklebolt keeps popping in from the island to keep them informed.

Apparently, the Aurors aren’t busy with fighting Death Eaters, but with rounding up the other prisoners that had fled during the initial attack.

“I don’t understand, how did they all escape, even the non Death Eaters?” Fudge asks. “And what are the Dementors doing?”

“They’ve turned against us,” Shacklebolt says, grim. “We’re having to fight them, and try to recapture the rest of the inmates.

“That can’t be,” Fudge whispers. “I- it can’t be. How can something like this happen?”

“We have to abandon the island,” Shacklebolt informs them. “We’re bringing whoever we recaptured here, but -”

“Abandon the island? Impossible!”

“Minister, it’s overrun with Dementors that went rogue.”

“We can’t abandon the prison-”

“There’s no prison left!” Shacklebolt yells at him. “It’s gone, don’t you understand?”

Sirius volunteers, with a handful of others, to see for themselves so they can decide what to do about it.

Shacklebolt Apparates them on the northern part of the island. It's the middle of the night, but it's so bright, Sirius has to blink a few times to adjust his eyes.

Aurors are fighting with Fiendfyre in the distance, attempting to end the curse that apparently has been raging for hours, despite the Aurors' best attempts to extinguish it.

It's Voldemort's. They all understand- at least the Aurors. No one else can power a curse to be this resilient.

Fiery snakes, dragons and chimeras dance in the air, engulfing everything they touch.

Other Aurors are trying to maintain bright shields, a veritable Patronus army, to keep the dementors at bay, the mass of black shadows doing their best to smash against it.

Confused prisoners are rounded up.

And, in the middle, where the prison used to be…

There's only a pillar left standing, and on it, a man is nailed in that strange muggle fashion Sirius had seen in churches. Fiendfyre rages all around him, but, strangely, it doesn't touch him.

"Dear gods," someone whispers. "Who is that!?"

"Robards." Shacklebolt looks away. "He's dead. We- he was under some curse, yelling in agony, and we can't reach him, as you see. There was- we tried everything, but -this was the only way to…help him."

The handful of Wizengamot members Apparate away, claiming they have seen enough, eager to get out of the island before either the flames or the dementors engulf it.

Sirius stays for a few moments more, looking up at Robards, the only one on his 'to kill list' he couldn't get a hold of, hiding away in this fortress.

Hours later, Fudge finally gives permission for the Aurors to abandon the island.

Twenty-seven prisoners are missing, and there is no way to find out which of them escaped, or which died.

Down in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, there's chaos, as they try to cram all the Azkaban inmates into the Ministry cells.

From the preliminary testimonies the Aurors got from them, conflicting accounts arouse.

Some say it was someone that looked like Barty Crouch that sneaked inside the prison with the Dementor's help and started all this, arming the inmates with wands.

Others say it was Voldemort. The Aurors clearly believe the latter.

Dumbledore does as well, having arrived at the meeting hours after Sirius.

Fudge, however, latches onto Barty. “Wasn’t he dead?”

“Some inmates say he escaped ten years ago, that his mother took his place-”

“And Crouch Senior used to be Head of the Department,” Lucius drawls. “He’d know how to communicate with Dementors, all the Ministry and Aurors tricks. He must have told his son when he helped Junior escape, apparently.”

“Arrest Crouch!” Fudge yells. “It’s him! Arrest him!”

“It’s Voldemort,” Dumbledore insists. “Cornelius, listen to reason. I keep telling you he’s back-”

“He’s not back!”

Fudge is pissed with Dumbledore, who refused to help the Aurors extinguish the uncontrollable Fiendfyre, probably the only man able to put an end to a curse so strong. But Dumbledore long wanted Azkaban gone, he went on for decades how such a place shouldn’t exist, how that was not a prison but a ‘torture island’. He will not help regain it for the Ministry.

Scrimgeour screams, too, looking ready to throttle Fudge, swearing up and down Crouch Sr. would never do something like this, but Fudge overrules him, and signs the arrest order.

The Aurors return with old Crouch, some half an hour later. With his *body*.

“It appears he killed himself.”

“Out of guilt, no doubt,” Lucius whispers venom in Fudge’s ear.

Sirius wonders if maybe it was Lucius that killed Crouch Senior. Or was it Yaxley?

Was it, perhaps, Barty himself? Imitating his idol, turning a wand against his own father?

All the prison guards, and the handful of Aurors that were stationed in Azkaban are dead, turned to ash. Their bodies will never be retrieved.

Sirius can only think of Robards, nailed to that pillar; and of Bella. He tries to imagine how happy she must be, at that very moment, finally reunited with her husband.

It’s easier to think of that than of the terror around him.

(-)

He finally returns to Grimmauld, smelling of smoke even if he’s been on the island for at most five minutes.

Perhaps it's just in his head, but he can smell it.

The sun is rising, and Sirius orders Kreacher to bring him a drink, when the flames in his fireplace turn green.

There are a limited number of people that could come out of them; Sirius only allows the Malfoys and Blacks to connect via the floo network to Grimmauld. Them, and-

Evy and her kids rush out, all in their nightwear, the children looking confused, and Evy terrified.

Oh, shit.

Sirius rushes to her. "Are you alright?"

"He- he is back," she stutters. And by 'he', she doesn't mean Voldemort.

"Who, Mummy?"

"Shh," Evy says, though her hands tighten around the twins' shoulders, to such extent they grimace in pain. "I heard his voice. Banging on my door, pushing past the wards. It's him. I know it's him-"

"It is," Sirius confirms. "I was just at the Ministry. There was a mass escape from Azkaban."

Evy looks ready to collapse. "I took the kids and ran. But Andromeda stayed behind to make sure we got away-"

Sirius doesn't wait for her to finish the sentence, going through the fireplace himself.

As soon as he steps inside Evy's living room, he sees Andromeda, wand held with one hand behind her back. She's also in her nightgown.

And, in front of her…

Rabastan looks unrecognisable. He looks like a madman, like a vagabond from London.

Only those don't carry a wand.

Rabastan has his in his hand.

"-where are they?" Even his voice has changed.

"I don't know," Andromeda is saying, and just by her tone, it's clear she said it before. "I just woke up. Why don't you take a seat, Rabastan, I'll make you some tea, and we can-"

Sirius steps forward, and only then the others notice him.

Andromeda's eyes close briefly with relief.

Sirius signals with his head that she should leave.

For a moment, Rabastan grins at him, and Sirius can recognise him again, or at least traces of his friend.

“Fancy seeing you here, Black. What, you live here, too?”

“No.” Sirius doesn’t take out his wand, even if the room is suffocating with tension, with Rabastan’s wild magic.

But Rabastan isn’t pointing his wand at anything, just clinging to it.

“Evy came over to Grimmauld a few moments ago. You scared her, mate.”

Rabastan frowns. “Me? Why would she be afraid of me?”

“She didn’t know it was you. Just thought there was some intruder, so she took the kids and left.”

“Oh.” Rabastan frowns, and then he breaks into laughter. “Oh, right. I didn’t think of that.” He frowns again, even as he’s still laughing. “I just wanted to see her, meet the children.”

“It was unexpected, is all. For all she knows, you’re locked up. She had no reason to think it’s you, yeah? Just some stranger forcing her wards.”

“Fuck.” Rabastan slaps himself over his cheek. Quite *hard*. “Fuck, I didn’t think of that.”

“That’s alright,” Sirius says, trying very hard not to think about how awful Rabastan looks. “Why don’t you go- where are you staying?”

Rabastan starts pacing. “I-I don’t know. One of our properties. I-” He frowns. “I forgot. And I was just there.”

Sirius is taken back to those first hours after he was out of Azkaban, how confusing they were, how unreal they felt.

Seven months. I was there for just seven months.

“But you can Apparate back, no? Even if you forgot where, you just need to go back to where you came from.”

Rabastan says nothing, keeps pacing. He stops at the mantlepiece, where photographs are on display. He picks one with the twins, taken on their fifth birthday. Harry, Draco, Orion and Marvolo are there, too.

His old friend frowns harder. “That’s Lucius, and you. Potter? I-”

Sirius walks closer, slower, as if approaching a wild animal. “Our sons. That’s Draco,” Sirius points to the picture. “That’s Orion, and Marvolo, both mine.”

“Oh.” Rabastan just stares at the photograph, blankly.

“Let’s get you back to Scotland?” Sirius guesses. Must be the Lestrange property in Scotland. It’s the one the Aurors don’t know about. “You need rest. And a bath. Alright? Who told you where to find Evy?”

“Avery.” Rabastan doesn’t let go of the picture. “He didn’t want to, but- “ He starts laughing. “He’s still a coward, isn’t he? He told me and I came here as the others were -I don’t know. It was very chaotic. I think the dark lord is back. I saw him.”

Sirius slowly reaches out, as to not startle Rabastan. At first, Rabastan flinches, but after a moment, he relaxes in Sirius’ grip.

Clearly, he already broke the wards around Evy’s home, because when Sirius tries to Apparate them out, he manages just fine.

He guessed correctly.

They stand outside the sprawling manor, outside the rusty-looking gates.

They repel Sirius when he tries to cross them, but Sirius grabs Rabastan’s shoulder again and he is welcomed inside once he does it.

The garden is long dead, but he can already see people milling about through the windows.

“Can you bring Evy here?” Rabastan asks, as they walk towards the manor. “Explain to her it was me?”

“Here? I don’t think it’s a good idea. What with all the people.”

“Oh. Right. Then maybe I can come with you-”

“You need to bathe first, make yourself presentable. You look like shit, mate.”

In the living room Death Eaters and petty criminals alike sit on dusty couches, disorientated.

Walden and Amycus are handing them potions, tending to the injured.

“Where is Bella?” Sirius asks.

“Office,” Walden answers, sounding harassed.

Sirius needs to bring Rabastan to Bella and warn her to keep an eye on him. He can’t believe they just let him leave like that.

“Where’s the office?” Sirius asks Rabastan.

He hasn’t been to this place since he was a teenager.

“Don’t know,” Rabastan says, growing more and more agitated at his side, and yet he starts walking, and Sirius follows.

Apparently Rabastan does remember where the office is, after all, even if he seems to lead Sirius there in a trance.

Calm down, he thinks to himself, because his heart is pounding painfully.

He knows Voldemort is in that office.

Sirius opens the door, and his eyes immediately go to him. Voldemort is standing at the end of a long table.

Someone was speaking before Sirius entered, dragging Rabastan along, but as soon as he's in, the voice trails off.

Voldemort's gaze falls onto Sirius. Only for a moment.

In that moment, it's just Voldemort and Sirius that exist, just the two of them, as they are supposed to be-

Voldemort looks away, grabs some maps from the table and proceeds to ignore him.

Sirius swallows, and the room takes shape around him. He sees Bella, standing beside Voldemort.

And Rodolphus, sitting at the head of the table.

Dolohov, Rowle and Rookwood are all there, still in their Azkaban uniforms, sipping slowly from tall goblets.

All the inner circle is there.

"You should keep an eye on him," Sirius tells Bella, and he's proud his voice comes out stable. He nods to Rabastan. "At least for a while."

"Where the fuck did you go?" Bella asks. "I told you to stay put!"

Rabastan doesn't answer. He seems so confused. Clearly, he left before he was given any potion or help.

"I found him at-" Sirius starts to say, but Rodolphus stands.

"Get out of my house!" he snarls at Sirius, a vein standing out on his forehead.

He looks wild, hair much longer than he ever wore it, almost down to his hips, his beard down to his chest.

The room goes deathly quiet. No one even breathes in it.

"Out!" Rodolphus demands. "And let this be the last time you set foot on my property. Next time you dare, I'll kill you!"

Bella moves closer to her husband, places her hand on his elbow, but he wretches it away, glaring at Sirius.

Everyone at the table lowers their gaze, except Dolohov and Rowle, who also glare at Sirius, one with more focus than the other.

Avery, Parkninson, Nott, even Corban- they stare at the table.

Fucking cowards, Sirius thinks, trying to be mad at them, so he won't think of Voldemort, who stands besides Rodolphus, studying his maps, as if he forgot Sirius was there. As if he couldn't care less.

"Don't be a knob," Rabastan tells Rodolphus. "Sirius is-"

Sirius turns around and leaves. It's best that way. *If they don't want me here, then fine.*

He was doing them all a favour, he was doing Rodolphus a favour, bringing his brother back before he gets himself arrested again, but if they don't want him…

He kicks at a statue in the hallway, knocking it over.

For a moment, he feels like throwing a tantrum about how this isn't fair. How he was the one that brought Voldemort back, so he's the one that indirectly saved the rest from Azkaban; how he protected Avery and all the others in the war, and then after Voldemort fell, he kept them all safe, and now he's pushed aside from his own circle.

His first instinct is to go to Lucius and complain about it, but realises Lucius won't offer him any consolation, since even he is mad at Sirius.

(-)

He spends the rest of the day in a rage.

Every time he thinks of all those idiots together, excluding him, it makes his blood boil.

It makes him sad, but he refuses to feel sad, so anger it is.

Astrid and his mother try to speak to Sirius about the breakout, even Regulus attempts it, apparently getting over his disdain at least for long enough to get answers, but Sirius snaps at all his relatives.

He even snaps at his boys, after Marvolo pestered him around the house, trying to find out what is going on, clutching a newspaper that has Rodolphus' face all over the front page. Every time Rodolphus snarls at the photographer, it makes Sirius want to twist someone's neck.

“Mind yourself!” he growls at Marvolo. “Go to your room!”

“Daddy?” Helix asks, and Sirius snaps at him, too, and then immediately regrets it when his little lips wobble, and he makes those puppy eyes, looking up at Sirius, all betrayed and upset.

Marvolo picks his brother up, and with a final glare at Sirius, disappears from the room. “He’s been in a mood all day,” Sirius hears him telling Helix, once they are in the hallway. “I don’t know what crawled up his arse, but there’s no reason to cry, Helix. Blacks don’t cry. I’ll play with you, alright? Though, apparently, I’m banished to my room, so you’ll have to come with me there. We’ll improvise some toys. Bet if his precious heir was home, he wouldn’t have yelled at Orion. Or if he had, Orion would have yelled back. I miss him.”

“I can hear you!” Sirius screams after them.

“Great, now I can’t even talk!” Marvolo shoots back.

Sirius leaves Grimmauld before he upsets more of his family members, for no good reason.

He goes to a muggle pub, where he can get drunk and terrorise muggles, without guilt.

Eventually, he’s kicked out of there too, and *how dare they?* Everyone kicks him out, from Rodolphus to fucking muggles!

And Voldemort just let him, staring at his maps. *I brought you back, you arsehole!*

He’s very drunk when he finds himself in Malfoy Manor, ranting at Lucius, who looks tired.

Sirius expects to be thrown out of there, too, the way he’s acting, and seeing how he’s the reason Lucius is exhausted these days.

Man had the perfect life, and Sirius went ahead and ruined it, just so he can have Voldemort back, and now Voldemort *ignores* him.

The audacity!

“Maybe he wants to be dead again,” Sirius growls. “That will fucking teach him. Spend another decade in Albania, see if he wants to ignore me again after that!’’

Lucius is drinking, too, matching Sirius glass for glass, a tense muscle twitching on his jawline.

Lucius shouldn’t be drinking. He almost never does, no more than a glass or two, and Sirius always teased him about it, until Lucius actually got drunk with the others some years ago, and then apparently decided tormenting muggles would be *fun*.

Regulus woke Sirius at three in the morning, and Sirius, in his pyjamas, had to throw a black robe over himself, still half asleep, and go collect Lucius before the Aurors showed up.

"We're just having a bit of fun," Lucius slurs, all a smile, as Sirius wrestles him away from the others and Apparates him to the Manor. "We're not even hurting them, just toying with them, making them float around! We'll erase their memories when we're done, no harm done! Cissa, darling!" He lets go of Sirius, and hugs Narcissa, also in her nightgown, half asleep, waiting for them in the hallway.

Lucius lifts her, twirls her around and then kisses her. Sirius just stares at them, because he's never seen them affectionate with each other, not with how proper they both are.

"This is why he doesn't drink," Narcissa told Sirius, over Lucius' shoulder, but she was obviously in a good mood, smiling at Lucius even as she pretended to scold him.

"If you want to hang people upside down after you're done with that," Sirius says, pointing at the bottle beside Lucius. "I'll join you, but we'll target Rodolphus and the other pricks, not muggles!"

Lucius rolls his eyes, forces Sirius to sit on the couch. "I resigned myself he'll call me many variations of traitor for the next decade," he drawls. "That's if he doesn't die. Gods, where is Moody when you need him!?"

"But he didn't kick *you* out, did he?" Sirius insists. "I bet he let you stay when you went there. Voldemort probably deigned to look at you-"

"Wish he hadn't," Lucius mutters.

"You knew!" Sirius accuses him. "About the break out. You all knew, talked about it behind my back! You didn't tell me!"

Like you told me you'll bring the dark lord back? Sirius expects Lucius to ask.

But Lucius doesn't. Instead, he puts down the glass, turns to face him fully, and puts his hand on Sirius' shoulder. "He doesn't deserve you," he says, simply.

It drains all the anger out of Sirius, leaves him just with sadness. "I left him alone, as a wraith, for a decade," he says, quietly. "I left Rodolphus and the others in Azkaban." Under all that anger, Sirius knows he is, indeed, the traitor.

"They got themselves in those situations," Lucius reminds him. "You went above and beyond for Bella, you tried to help Rabastan, you threw your own life back into chaos to bring *him* back. None of them deserve this loyalty, Sirius. I slept so soundly after those maniacs were locked up and he was gone, and I could finally enjoy peace again. I didn't spare a thought on them. Yaxley, Avery, Nott, Parkison- we all despise them. And yet it's you, that always helped them, you are the reason they're now free, that he's alive again…they push *you* out. And you still feel guilty, somehow. Stop it."

"You don't understand." Lucius truly doesn't. "I survived with him gone, but I can't accept him alive and well and ignoring me. I *can't*. I didn't bring him back out of selflessness or loyalty. I brought him back because I want him."

It's horrible. Sirius wants Voldemort, demands him, feels he's entitled to him, whether Voldemort wants him back or not.

And it's unbearable to think that way.

Lucius sighs. "He wants you, too, don't be an idiot. He's obsessed, as obsessed as he's been since the moment he met you."

"You think?"

"I know. He keeps asking about you, interrogates people, really."

"He hasn't contacted me-"

"Give him space. He's a…" Lucius bites his tongue, regains his diplomatic, cautious ways. "He's intelligent, but intelligence has nothing to do with these matters. He's sorely lacking in this department. Just have patience. As for Rodolphus-"

"I don't care about Rodolphus," Sirius says, feeling lighter, even happy, hearing Voldemort interrogates people about him. "He's just upset, he'll get over it."

Lucius snorts, rolls his eyes, and goes back to his glass.

(-)

"So, Regis' and Regina's father is free now?" Marvolo asks, in Sirius' office.

After he sobered up, and he apologised in the only way he knows how to, by spoiling his kids and Astrid rotten, he promised he'll answer Marvolo's questions.

Of course, this is the first one, and already Sirius doesn't know how to answer it.

Evy stays hidden in one of the guests room, in bed, only wanting to speak to her children.

Regis and Regina look spooked, excited, and confused, all at once.

"Their father died," Sirius says, carefully.

"Oh, *please*. We all know their dad is Bella's brother-in-law. She said as much, several times."

Fuck Bella, really. And Mrs Rowle, the hag, that always calls the twins 'tiny Lestranges' whenever she can.

He sighs. "The Lestrange brothers escaped, yes. Both of them," he says, avoiding confirming anything about the worst kept secret in their circle.

“Bella must be so happy! Auntie really missed Uncle Rodolphus.”

“Don’t call him Uncle *anything*.” Sirius makes a face.

“Why? I mean, yes, I know Bella is my cousin, not my aunt, but since I call her that, then why can’t he be my uncle? He’s amazing, anyway. Bella said so. I can’t wait to meet him. When can I meet him? He’s a hero!”

Astrid was always right. Sirius shouldn’t have turned a blind eye to all the shit Bella told his sons.

“He’s a fugitive, a wanted man. You cannot speak of him in public, and you definitely can’t go around calling him a hero-”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Marvolo waves it away. “How did they escape, Father? Because they’re so powerful?”

Sirius feels his eye twitching. “They’re so powerful they waited twelve years to escape? No. We don’t know how they escaped yet. They probably had someone on the outside who helped them. What do Regina and Regis think?” Sirius asks. “How are they feeling?”

When they were younger, they’d tell Sirius or Lucius anything; Regis, especially, who obviously felt the lack of a father figure in his life. But they’re all stoic now, guarded, even with Evy.

Bella again, no doubt, teaching them Lestranges don’t complain.

“They’re confused. They’d like to speak of their father, and learn what happened, but Evy still denies it’s true, so they stopped asking her. And Bella isn’t here, so …they’re a bit scared, I think.”

Great, now Sirius has more reasons to feel guilty. Well, more reasons to feel guilty about not feeling guilty enough for the way he changed the twins’ lives.

He doesn’t want to think about Orion and Harry coming home, the amount of explanations and lies he’ll have to tell them. They are both away with Draco and Narcissa, to one of Bianca’s villas in Italy, to celebrate Blaise’s birthday.

As it is, Harry and Orion come back a few days later, already in a fight. It doesn’t take long to figure out it’s because Orion is excited about the news, called Rodolphus a hero, too, and Harry…well, Harry has been sharing a bedroom with Neville Longbottom.

Harry was never particularly close to Bella, a combination of Sirius keeping them apart, and Bella not wanting much to do with Harry. Still, many times they played together, Bella teaching him his first spell ever; they smiled at each other, and he’d blush and call her ‘beautiful’.

Since he came back from his first year at Hogwarts, Harry seemed distant with her, and Sirius knows why, even if they never spoke about it.

Harry knew why Bella was sentenced, why she can't have her own wand, why she can't go out in public. Eventually, everyone in the household learned about the Longbottoms. But it's one thing to know, in abstract, and quite another to share a dorm with Neville, Sirius imagines. Even so, Bella is family, so Harry bit his tongue. Bella laughs often, and is always patient with the boys, never in a bad mood, never scolding them, the 'cool' aunt. It's hard, it's always been so very hard for Sirius to associate her with the crazed Bellatrix Lestrange, Death Eater. It must be just as hard for Harry.

But Rodolphus….Harry has no emotional attachment to Rodolphus. He's easier to hate and despise and recognise him as the man that tortured the parents of his classmate into insanity.

Besides, for years, whenever the kids would learn of a particular gruesome act Death Eaters have committed, and they'd ask about it with unsure gazes, with shocked expressions, everyone would say '*oh, that was Rodolphus*'. Even Sirius is guilty of it, joining Lucius and Corban and the others in blaming anything too horrible during the war on Rodolphus, just so they won't have to tell their sons they were the ones that participated in such atrocities.

Still, Harry doesn't say anything to Sirius, and Sirius doesn't try to speak about it, either.

One day, he knows, all these unsaid things will be yelled loudly and painfully all around the house.

One day. But not yet.

He hopes Draco is on Harry's side. He hopes when the news reached them, in Italy, Draco didn't call Rodolphus a hero. Draco was exposed to Bella, like Sirius' sons, but Draco must have heard Lucius or Narcissa saying unflattering things about the man during the years.

(-)

"Slytherin, or you're disowned!" Sirius' mother warns, sternly.

"You don't have the power to disown me. Right, Father?" Orion asks, smugly.

"That's right," Sirius confirms, sending his mother a glare. She holds his gaze, unbothered.

"Your Hogwarts house system is very divisive. I'll never understand it," Astrid complains. "Durmstrang is much better."

"Sounds like it." Orion nods. "Perhaps I should have gone there, instead."

"Sure, you'd love the incredibly harsh punishments they doll out," Sirius says, rolling his eyes.

Astrid, and some of her relatives, told him punishments at Durmstrang were harsh and unfair. Professors would often place entire classes in detention because one student had displeased

them, usually by talking or getting a question wrong.

“Hogwarts is great!” Harry says, heated. “Trust me, you’ll love it. Besides, Durmstrang allows the Dark Arts as a subject.”

“So? I think that’s great,” Orion says. “I want to learn the Arts.”

Sirius feels a muscle twitching in his jaw. “Eat your dinner and shut up.”

Orion narrows his eyes. “I think I’d be fine with the so called strict punishments. The professors there can’t be more tyrannical than you are!”

Astrid laughs. She pinches Orion’s cheek. “My Trasnfiguration Professor would have eaten you alive,” she says fondly.

“Did you learn the Dark Arts, Mother?” Marvolo asks. He’s been moody all day. He complains about Orion non-stop, yet now that Orion will be gone the following day, it seems it makes Marvolo unhappy.

“It was an elective only allowed to students over fifteen years old,” she says, ambiguous.

Marvolo frowns, not to be deterred. “But did you take the subject?”

Everyone is looking at her, curious, except Sirius, who already knows the answer.

Astrid smiles. “I believe your father told you to be quiet and eat your meal.”

Once, in her fights with Bellatrix, when Bella mocked Astrid, his wife stood, got in Bella’s face and said, *“when you were fifteen, they were teaching you how to knit dresses. When I was fifteen, I was taught the Unforgivables.”* She smiled, a cutting thing. *“And that was only the first lesson.”*

Bella still mocked her, unconcerned, but her respect for Astrid grew a little after that.

The next morning, Astrid hugs and kisses Orion before they leave the house. Sirius does the same, holding the kid close for longer than necessary. He’ll miss him terribly, he knows. “Mind yourself,” he whispers, gently, so only Orion hears him, as Astrid now fusses over Harry. Sirius hates himself a little as he goes on, but…it is what it is. “You’re a Black. My eldest son. You know what’s expected of you.”

Orion nods.

Even spoiled Draco, with soft Lucius letting him get away with so much…even Draco knew to return home with perfect grades. And when he didn’t, after his first year, Lucius did have a talk with him. His grades are perfect, now.

They go to the Platform, and Astrid tries to hug Orion again, but Orion bats her arms away, hisses an embarrassed ‘Mum!’.

Marvolo tries to hug him, too, but Orion pushes him away quickly.

They watch him and Harry board the train, Marvolo looking miserable at Sirius' side.

Astrid tries to hug him, as the train slowly pulls away, but even Marvolo shies away from it, even if at home he's practically glued to Astrid's robes.

"Cheer up," Sirius says. "You'll have a few months without anyone bullying you."

It does get a grin out of the boy. "Right! When we go home, I'm going to go to his room, look through his things and sleep in his bed! With my shoes on!"

"No, you will not," Astrid admonishes, but Marvolo looks at Sirius, who winks at him.

(-)

Father,

I am, of course, in Slytherin. Snape is livid. He glared at me for the whole feast.

Draco was not exaggerating, you can really see the giant squid from the Common Room. It's a nice room, but I must say, they went somewhat overboard with all the green. Gods, I can already hear how Marvolo will complain when he sees it.

Please tell Grandma I was sorted into Gryffindor. Or would Hufflepuff be worse? I will let you decide what would anger her more. I hope she will send me a Howler before she learns the truth.

Talk to Lucius to get Draco off my back. Also, tell Harry the same. I did, but maybe it will get through that stubborn skull of his if you reinforce it. I'm serious, they embarrass me! I don't need them to look after me!

Your son and heir,

Orion.

P.S: What was your nickname for Snape, again? Snivellus, was it?

(-)

To my son and heir,

I told Mother you went to Gryffindor. No one would believe you would ever go to Hufflepuff. They're nice and tame and you are neither. Expect a Howler soon.

Snivellus it was. It will anger him the most. I also used to call him 'the unwashed one'. James called him 'crater face'. 'Basement dweller', though I suppose you're a basement dweller now, so that won't do.

Congratulation on your sorting! You know these things don't matter to me, but as long as you are happy with it, I am as well.

With love,

Your father, who does not need reminding you are his heir.

(-)

When he tells his mum Orion went to Gryffindor, she only sighs, and then she orders Kreacher to bring her a bag she kept in her room. From it, she pulls out Gryffindor and Slytherin coloured ties and badges, and two gorgeous winter cloaks, one lined with silver, one lined with gold.

"Throw these away," she tells Kreacher, pushing the Slytherin items towards him, and she prepares to pack the others to send to Orion.

It makes Sirius all warm inside, and he smiles, bends to kiss her cheek.

"I'm joking, Mum. He's in Slytherin."

That makes her yell at Sirius for messing around with her and 'acting childish', but despite it, Sirius still feels happy.

She never sent him nor bought him anything in red and gold when he was sorted into Gryffindor. Just a letter letting him know how disappointed she was with him and how he shamed the family, how he'll be contaminated with all the muggleborns in there.

But somehow that's now erased entirely, washed clean with how willing she is to do better for Orion.

The house is quiet without Harry and Orion. Marvolo is less likely to misbehave, without encouragement, and Helix never causes much problems.

He's such a cheerful boy, a ray of sunshine, always with a smile ready for whoever he sees. Of course, he does have the Black temper, and when he's upset, he lets everyone know it, but he's so rarely bothered, one must make an effort to get him to throw a tantrum.

Every night, before Kreacher takes him to his room, Helix insists to toddle to each of them, in turn, kiss them all, saying *'I love you, Mama, I love you Daddy, I love you Grandma'*. Even Kreacher isn't left out, getting his cheek kissed, and his ears tickled, and Sirius cannot

remember ever seeing Kreacher so happy, smiling widely and singing to himself, always in a good mood when he puts Helix to bed.

He is starting to have nightmares, now that he was moved out of the nursery and into his new bedroom, way too big and scary for him.

And when he has a nightmare, he wants Sirius, because apparently the monsters that are hiding under his bed are only afraid of Sirius, no one else. Only then does he climb the little stairs to his bed and settles back beneath the blankets, satisfied he is safe.

“Why don’t I sleep here, just in case?” Sirius asks, and Helix agrees, delighted, snuggling into Sirius’s chest.

This is more for Sirius’ benefit, who can only get some respite from obsessively thinking of Voldemort when he’s with Helix.

“I miss Orion and Harry,” Helix says, often. “I love them!”

“I love them, too.”

“Do you love them more than me?”

“No, I could never love someone more than I love you. You’re my favourite, my perfect little boy,” Sirius assures him. “But you can’t tell the others, yes? This is our secret. Can you keep a secret for Daddy?”

“I can!” Helix promises. “You’re my favourite Daddy, too!”

Sirius laughs and kisses him all over, making Helix giggle uncontrollably.

(-)

The first notice for detention comes in Snape’s messy handwriting. Sirius loves having Snape forced to write to him in an official capacity, as is his duty as Head of Slytherin House.

No points are taken. Orion is apparently made to clean potion jars for six nights in a row, but not a single point is taken.

Sirius rolls his eyes. Of course Snape won’t take points from his own House, no matter how much Orion annoys him.

McGonagall never had such issues, she almost gleefully took points from James and Sirius, and she does the same with Harry.

But Dumbledore always finds a way to steal away the cup from Slytherin at the end of the year feast. Draco still moans about his and Harry’s first year and how ‘that senile walking

cadaver' awarded Gryffindors 'a million points, at the last second'.

To make it worse for Snape, Remus is teaching Defence this year. Dumbledore is definitely keeping his pawns close to home, now that he knows Voldemort is back. He won't risk having a spy or someone that isn't loyal to him on his staff again.

Sirius is sure Dumbledore is forming the Order again.

With Remus busy at Hogwarts, Sirius asks Dora, freshly back from Romania, to teach the handful of young werewolves whatever can be taught to them, every other weekend.

(-)

Sirius thinks something terrible has happened when he is assaulted by owls on a Tuesday afternoon. One from Harry, one from Orion, one from Draco, one from Regis, and one from Lucius.

He instantly rips open the one from Orion.

A hippogriff bit Draco.

Though the one from Harry says it 'lightly scratched him'.

The one from Draco says it mauled him.

Regis just says Draco is hurt.

Lucius makes it sound like his son has died.

His mother, reading over his shoulder, shakes her head in disbelief. "That's what you get when you hire that bumbling idiot to teach."

Astrid is enraged. She wants Sirius to immediately remove Harry and Orion from Hogwarts, and starts saying how this would never happen at Durmstrang.

Marvolo, wide eyed, hurries to write a letter to Dumbledore to demand he fire Hagrid. "I know the Headmaster," he boasts to his mother. "He knows me, too!"

(-)

"Lucius, it's a bird, come on-"

"I will have it killed! And the giant won't survive the summer, mark my words!"

Sirius rubs his temples. Lucius is so mad that Sirius would let the matter rest, let him put the poor hippogriff to death.

However, Harry wrote again, and *again*, to beg Sirius to save 'Buckbeak'.

Harry is so distressed that apparently even Draco changed his mind and wrote to Lucius to let it go, that it wasn't so bad. But it's already too late.

Lucius' jurist started the procedures to have the animal killed. Narcissa and Lucius are both *demented*, really.

"If it was your son-"

"My son was kicked in the face by an abraxan, and it's still my favourite horse! My other son, shall I remind you, was pecked by two of your peacocks! And did I ask you to kill them? No, I laughed for half an hour!"

"Well, it was Marvolo's fault for trying to pluck their feathers," Lucius says, defensive.

"And it was Draco's fault for insulting the hippogriff! He's not a muggleborn, for fuck's sake! He knows better!"

Lucius cannot be reasoned with. He's always been ridiculously overprotective. He makes it very clear that if Sirius hires his own jurist to defend Buckbeak, Lucius will consider him an enemy.

Sirius believes it. And, no matter how ridiculous, he does understand, as a father, that he wouldn't look kindly at someone defending the people that hurt his sons.

They simply have *very* different definitions of what 'hurt' means.

Caught between Lucius and Harry, Sirius has no other choice but to commit theft.

He sneaks onto Hogwarts grounds at night, as Padfoot, triggering no wards. All these years, and Dumbledore still hasn't protected the castle against Animagi. He must be going senile, indeed.

Though he probably doesn't do it because it would stop McGonagall from performing the trick she's so fond of, shocking first years with her transformation.

He finds the Hippogriff where Harry wrote he would be. Tied to the fence beside Hagrid's hut, near the pumpkin patch.

Maddeningly, he finds Hagrid there, too, weeping and apologising to the creature.

He's annoying it, Sirius can tell immediately. He can sense the hippogriff's mood, as Padfoot always senses, and it's annoyed and anxious.

Sirius waits until Hagrid is done crying and retreats to his hut.

Padfoot approaches Buckbeak, cautiously.

Those intelligent eyes turn to pin him with interest.

Padfoot looks around, and shifts into Sirius.

He would bow, but he's a Black, and it doesn't matter, it's a *bird*, but that lesson has been ingrained into him since birth and Sirius finds he cannot discard it, not even for such a silly thing.

"Hello," he says, creeping closer. "I hear you're in a speck of trouble, huh? So am I, really. I can't believe I'm reduced to stealing hippogriffs. These people are driving me insane!" He goes closer, still. The hippogriff tilts its head to the side, curious. "You really are handsome, aren't you? Harry was right. I can see why he's so fixated on you. Well, that, and he's a bleeding heart." Sirius sighs, reaches the hippogriff. "Between you and me- and you can't tell anyone- I'm also a tad sensitive when ani- when majestic creatures such as yourself find themselves in danger, yeah? It's just not fair, is it?"

It makes a sound, a chirp. *Fuck, but it really is a handsome specimen*, and just seeing it tied down with a chain is upsetting Sirius. Voldemort would laugh with derision to see *his* bleeding heart.

"You were meant for the skies, weren't you? Soaring free under the stars, not chained down like a dog. Not that I'd ever chain a dog, mind you," he babbles, as he waves his wand and the chains fall to the ground. "So, how about we go for a ride?"

Sirius runs a hand, confident, over his neck. Buckbeak enjoys it, chirping again.

"It's been many years since I've ridden a hippogriff, so don't laugh at me! We used to have two of them at the Manor, when I was very small. One got into a fight with Tessuth and… yeah, only one remained after, and it flew away one day. I'm much better on an abraxan or a bike- *fuck,* I miss that bike," Sirius says, and Buckbeaks lowers its front legs, a clean invitation to be mounted.

Sirius does. "Thank you, you're a very good boy, you are. Between you and me, I get why you snapped at Draco. I want to slap him on occasion, too, but I can't, because his parents would murder me." Buckbeak straightens, and Sirius gives him a pat on the side. "Let's go, then."

And off they go.

Sirius cannot help the laughter that comes bubbling out when they take flight. It's exhilarating!

Stealing from Dumbledore, the Ministry, and Lucius, all at once.

Buckbeak enjoys the ride just as much; he's already been chained down for two months, and it's obvious how much he likes stretching his wings. He's malleable under Sirius, allows him to steer him easily. It's a long ride, and it only makes Sirius miss his bike more.

He's been on brooms and abraxans since that Halloween, but only short rides, or to play Quidditch with the boys. This, though- this is like *before*, just him, under the stars, flying high, so high, wind blowing in his hair, and the bird purrs so satisfied under him, it's almost like an engine.

It's hours before they land at Black manor. Sirius dismounts, laughs again, and puts his face on Buckbeaks' neck, pats it's flank gently. "Thank you. That was great. Now, you can hunt around these woods, there's plenty to get. You can do anything, but watch out for the abraxans, especially the steed, he's quite temperamental. Do not bother the elves, either. They'll fuck you up."

He knows Buckbeak can't really understand him, but that never stopped Sirius from talking to animals as if they were people. He is sometimes an animal, and even if he still retains his intelligence, he does know that while most animals don't understand sentences, they do understand the intent behind them.

He hopes Buckbeak will stick around, but even if not, at least it's free. At least Harry will be happy.

Chaos starts the next morning. Hagrid is arrested, briefly, for letting the hippogriff go. But even under Veritaserum, he still claims he hadn't let it go, that he has no idea how 'Bucky' freed itself, or where it is.

He's made to pay a huge fine, and Dumbledore is subjected to an inquiry as well, while Lucius rages and seethes, but eventually lets it drop. He still has vague plans to kill Hagrid, but at least he forgets about the hippogriff, especially since Draco's injuries have long healed.

Buckbeak sticks around the manor. He could have left, but he chose to stay, and whenever Sirius visits the manor, Buckbeak comes around to nudge his head against his and chirps happily.

"You're the best dad ever, Sirius! The best! I love you so, so much! Thank you!" Harry writes, after Sirius sends him a picture of Helix laughing, perched on top of Buckbeak.

"So what, we'll never invite Lucius and Cissa to the manor ever again?" Astrid demands, when they're trying to have lunch, but Buckbeak keeps knocking Sirius off his chair, wanting to fly.

"They have never seen Buckbeak," Sirius reassures her. "I'll just tell him I decided to get a hippogriff to teach the boys never to insult one, after the *tragedy* that befell Draco."

"And Draco? We know he can't keep his mouth shut!"

"Draco promised Harry he won't say a thing!"

"Fine," she agrees. "But if Buckbeak so much as looks wrong at Helix, I am killing him myself and will serve him for dinner," she goes on, matter of fact. Sirius believes her.

“Please, our kids are smart. If Helix insults a hippogriff, kill *me* and serve me for dinner, because I have failed as a father thoroughly.”

She rolls her eyes, but she smiles, and Sirius convinces her to go with him and Buckbeak on a ride later in the day.

(-)

Sirius,

I found the Map. The Weasley twins, I assume you know of them from Harry, had somehow gotten hold of it some years ago. I had it confiscated. I would like to give it to Harry, with your permission.

He has a habit of breaking curfew, wandering about the hallways with his friends, and I imagine the Map would help keep him out of detention.

He looks so much like James. It’s been months, yet I’m still taken aback every time he walks into the Great Hall for breakfast. He’s an amazing child. I know James would be so proud of him; and of you. You did a wonderful job with him.

Orion definitely takes after you. Apparently, he torments his Head of House on a daily basis, or at least rumour would have it. You know Slytherins, closed ranks and all that, it’s hard to say with certainty what happens down in the dungeons.

Seeing Harry and Orion together brings back many memories. Some painful, but mostly joyful. Being back to Hogwarts turned me nostalgic, I suppose.

I am aware you do not wish to hear from me, but please, respond regarding the Map.

Wishing you are well,

Remus.

(-)

You may give Harry the Map.

He stares at the short note. Just before he rolls the parchment, he takes back the quill.

I used to call you Professor, back in the day, remember? Seems I have Seer blood. But I said you’d be like Binns, putting us to sleep the way you did with your long rants. Apparently, I

was wrong. Harry says you're his favourite teacher. Orion is less impressed, but he's a hard one to win over. Don't take it personally, he hates most everyone he meets.

Remember to take your special potion. We might have found your furry problem exciting when we were teenagers, but I don't find it so amusing now that my sons are there. Be careful. Be ***very*** *careful.*

Greyback tested Wolfsbane, back when it was made available. He said it did nothing to him, but then it wouldn't, since Greyback and his trueborn sons always had the gift of retaining their minds during a transformation. He did test it on a bitten werewolf, after, and while the pack will never use it again, sees it as an abomination, Greyback assured Sirius that under the potion, the wolf is contained, made tame and harmless, otherwise Sirius would have informed the Hogwarts Board of Governors and the Ministry that Remus is a werewolf and would have barred Dumbledore from hiring him.

The older he gets, the more horrified he becomes when he remembers how poorly contained Remus was at Hogwarts, how easily it was for a bunch of fifteen years olds to roam around the grounds with a full-blown werewolf, unrestrained.

(-)

They have exactly two peaceful days, once the children come home from Hogwarts for Yule.

Orion must have missed Marvolo, after all, because he's nice to him, even hugs him when he enters Grimmauld, Harry won't let go of Helix, and everyone has a great time, with no fights.

Even Regulus pulls the stick out from his arse and at least attends Yule, deigns to speak to Sirius, unprompted, even.

And then, Regis disappears from his home.

"We heard a scream in the middle of the night, so we rushed to his room, only to find him missing," Andromeda tells Sirius. "On his bed, there was a letter from Rodolphus, telling Evy to keep her mouth shut about it, and that if she wants to see Regis again, then she will have to accept seeing Rabastan."

Evy and the twins spent the summer in Grimmauld, but when the twins left for Hogwarts, Evy went back to her home, especially after she received a letter from Rabastan apologising for his behaviour that night.

"Bella said he's getting better," she told Sirius. *"That he's slowly recovering, mentally and physically."*

Rabastan sent another letter, at the end of November, asking to see her, but when she said 'no', nothing happened. Evy felt safe.

“So,” Andromeda continues, “you can imagine, she wrote to Rabastan immediately, and she went to speak to him.”

“Why on earth didn’t you wake me?”

“Because she didn’t want me to tell anyone! Rodolphus has her son!”

“As if Rodolphus would kill a boy! His own nephew!”

Andromeda watches Sirius closely. “I do believe he would kill a boy. Evy thinks the same.”

“He wouldn’t! He’s not…” Sirius trails off. “Bella wouldn’t let him.”

“Bella clearly allowed him to kidnap Regis,” Andromeda points out, softly. “She’s wrecked by guilt, Sirius. For abandoning him in Azkaban. For a while, she will let Rodolphus get away with everything he pleases, even sacrificing her friendship with Evy, even sacrificing Regis, whom she helped raised. You know Bella,” she whispers, takes Sirius’ hand. “Let’s not fool ourselves. We *both* know Bella. There is no end to what she’d do or allow to happen, for the people she loves.”

“She loves Evy and the twins-”

“She is fond of them,” Andromeda corrects. “Bella loves her blood family, her husband, and her lord. She’ll sacrifice anyone else for us.”

Sirius says nothing to that. He will always defend Bella, to the end of the world and beyond, but this is Andromeda. If anyone knows Bella as well as Sirius does, it’s her sisters. And he does not need to defend her from her sisters. They are the only souls entitled to speak even remotely unflattering words about her.

“Evy came back in the morning. She packed, hurriedly, took Regina and left. She wouldn’t tell me where she is going. She doesn’t trust me. And…well, after Bella, I don’t blame Evy. And now, here we are. I’ve no idea what has happened.”

Andromeda shrugs, then throws her arms in the air as if to say ‘what can you do?’

(-)

Sirius,

I married Rabastan yesterday afternoon. It was a private ceremony.

Regis and Regina miss you. Regis especially.

Evy

Sirius reads the short, hastily scribbled note again, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

It is her handwriting, Sirius knows it so well after all these years, even when it's not in perfect calligraphy, the way Evy likes to write. But Sirius had received many, so many quick notes over the years, asking for help with the twins. '*Regis fell from the treehouse, but he won't let me check him over, throws a tantrum if I lift his shirt. Can you come?'*.

'Sirius, Regina is driving me up a wall, do you have a moment to speak to her?'

'The kids stole Mrs Rowle's rabbit and we can't find it! Can you please speak with Mrs Rowle and then come find the bloody thing?'

It is her handwriting, but this isn't Evy. It isn't how she'd tell Sirius she got married. She wouldn't have gotten married, not like this, out of the blue.

'*Regis especially.'*

His stomach sinks further. He throws the note in the fireplace.

He knows what happened, had known it since the previous day when he talked to Andromeda. After all, Rodolphus once asked Sirius, long ago, to give his ring to Regis, to legitimise the twins as Lestranges.

Rodolphus, in Azkaban, thought about legacy, about the very real possibility his family line would end with him and Rabastan.

It's useless writing to Bella. The letters often return, sealed and intact, because they cannot find her, hidden either by Voldemort's wards, or now by Lestrange blood wards.

And, even if the letters found her….Andromeda is right. Bella will allow Rodolphus to do what he wants.

She always did, even before, one way or another. Rodolphus and Bella supported each other fiercely, stood by each other's every *terrible* decision, made a common front even when they privately disagreed with one another. But now, after Azkaban? Oh, Sirius knows how guilty she feels, how she'll overcompensate, do anything that she thinks would make Rodolphus happy.

She'll tell herself they'll be alright, won't she?

And Sirius will have to tell himself the same. Regis is now the Heir Apparent to Rodolphus' legacy. He will be alright. It's why this wedding happened, after all.

He'll be alive, a voice whispers in his ear. *But alright?*

He has an image of shy, spoiled, sensitive Regis, alone with Rodolphus, learning how to be a Lestrange, a 'proper one', learning how to be 'a man'.

"Fuck."

(-)

"I spoke with Regis. He's fine. A tad…well, you can imagine, but he's fine."

Oh, Sirius can imagine.

"Don't do anything stupid," Lucius says next, but he has a resigned look on his face, because he knows Sirius cannot ignore this.

He wishes he could. Many times in the past decade he wished to be like Bella; truth be told, his entire life he wanted to be like Bella.

"Strong," he once told his father. "*She's so strong."* He was ten and felt guilty about how he and Bella treated Regulus at dinner, to the point his brother ran away crying from the table. Bella laughed. Sirius laughed, too, but deep down he felt bad, and he couldn't enjoy the rest of the festivities.

"Cruel," his father corrected him. *"That's not strength, that's cruelty."*

Sirius is cruel. He knew this about himself since he was young. Yet sometimes…sometimes he thinks he's not cruel *enough,* not uncaring enough. Not even after the past decade, and all the terrible things he had to do.

He waits outside of the wards he triggered, knowing someone will have to show up.

What if Voldemort is here? What if he ignores Sirius again?

You should be more concerned that if Voldemort is here, it means he's near the children.

But Sirius isn't concerned about that. The twins aren't half-bloods; they aren't Potters.

No one on earth will hurt those kids now. No one but Rodolphus.

And there he is, marching towards Sirius, down the stone pathway.

He looks alright, Rodolphus does. Skinner than he used to be, gaunter, a bit older. His hair is now cut short, so close to the skull it doesn't even look red anymore, but a dark brown.

Sirius remembers the need to chop all his hair off when he got out of Azkaban.

Rodolphus kept the beard though, even if it's now groomed properly.

He doesn't look as intimidating as Sirius once saw him. Oh, he *is*, there's an air of danger about him, his eyes harsher than ever, but to Sirius…

He's faced scarier things.

Rodolphus stops on the other side of the invisible wards.

“You have a death wish, clearly.”

Sirius shrugs. “I don’t. And I hope you aren’t feeling suicidal, either. Because you dying is the only outcome if you raise a wand at me.”

He expects Rodolphus to laugh at him, to remind him of their last duel, when he left Sirius almost unconscious on the ground.

But Rodolphus doesn’t laugh. Possibly Bella told him about the Roux family.

Or maybe Corban explained Sirius is no longer the boy he used to be. That he will not allow another man to raise their wand at him and survive the gesture.

Unless, of course, that man is Voldemort.

But Rodolphus isn’t. “What do you want?”

“I want to see the twins and Evy.”

Rodolphus rolls his eyes, and even if everything changed…for a second, Sirius is transported back into the past, into easier times, when Rodolphus would be constantly exasperated with Sirius.

“Your girlfriend talked to the boy a couple of days ago, didn’t he tell you? Or is it possible you don’t trust blondie? Trouble in paradise? Distrust between the traitors, is there?”

“I know the kids are fine,” Sirius says, doing his best to ignore the insults. “But I also know they are asking to see me.”

Rodolphus’ eyebrow lifts, mockingly. “How do you know that?”

“Because I raised them,” Sirius says. “I looked after them as if they were my own. And I will keep doing that, until I’m dead. So best if you just let me see them.”

“Fucking Blacks.” Rodolphus sneers, takes out his wand. “If you even think of taking the boy away-”

“You think I’d steal Rabastan’s son away?” Sirius sneers back. “When it’s because of him that I raised Regis and Regina best I was able? *For* him. Your spirit clearly wasn’t broken in Azkaban, but your brain might have, if you think that.”

Rodolphus modifies the wards. They shimmer in the air for a second before they turn invisible once more.

“At least I didn’t cry like a baby, for seven fucking months,” Rodolphus spits, viciously.

Don’t react. You brought Azkaban up first. You went low, he goes lower.

Besides, he doesn't even remember crying in Azkaban. He doesn't remember much from that time. Even after all these years, those months remain a black hole of misery.

"You can see the children, but not Evelyn," Rodolphus goes on, once Sirius crosses through the wards.

Sirius doesn't bother answering.

The walk is tense. Blessedly quiet, though. Rodolphus doesn't say another word as he has Sirius follow him through a maze.

The garden looks in disrepair, though clearly efforts are underway to restore it to its former glory.

Sirius sees no one else on the short walk, no Death Eaters, no poor muggles used as target practice.

No Voldemort.

Until, eventually, they get out of the maze, into a smaller garden, and Sirius sees the twins sitting at a table, under a magically expanded roof, and also under a house-elf watchful gaze.

It takes another second for them to see him.

"Sirius?"

"Sirius!"

And then they're both running, books and parchments discarded and in a second they're both hugging him tightly.

Rodolphus doesn't leave. He doesn't even pretend to give them privacy, stands right there, next to Sirius, breathing over his shoulder the entire time.

Regis gets distracted by him often, sneaking fearful glances his way. Regina ignores him mostly, but a muscle ticks in her jaw the entire time, a small line sits between her eyebrows, and her eyes are slightly narrowed.

It's astonishing how much she takes after Rodolphus. Sirius had always seen it, but now that they're beside each other- *wow.*

Sirius tells the twins all sort of lies; that they will thrive now that they're with their father and uncle, that he's happy for them and everything will be better.

And they believe him, because that's the tragedy with children, the complete trust they have in their parental figures.

"We miss Orion," Regina says. "And Marvolo," she adds, after a moment.

“You’ll see them at school.” Or at least Sirius hopes they will; he hopes Rodolphus will allow them to return to Hogwarts. “For now, it’s better you …take the time to reconnect with your father.”

Regina looks unimpressed; Behind her, Rodolphus makes the exact same face. Both wear expressions of disappointment.

Poor Rabastan.

“We don’t see him much,” Regis says, quietly.

A terrible fucking idea to take Rabastan out of Azkaban, and straight into married life, with children. It took Sirius a long time to get the hang of it, he remembers how he struggled in the beginning, with Harry and Astrid and then Orion.

And he didn’t have a Rodolphus around to judge him at every step.

At the end, when Sirius prepares to leave, satisfied the twins look more at ease and that at least they know Sirius hadn’t forgotten about them, Regina spoils it all.

“He,” she says, with a stare at Rodolphus, “bullies Regis. He’s mean to Regis. Tell him to stop,” she demands.

Sirius thinks how to respond, but Rodolphus beats him to it. “I could bully you, instead, if you wish,” he says, vaguely threatening.

“Try it!” Regina spits back.

“Be nice,” Sirius tells her, something he’s been telling her for a decade, with little success.

She crosses her arms. “Tell him to be nice. He’s a -”

“Regina!”

She shuts up.

“Come here.” Sirius gently clasps his hand on Regis’ shoulder and pulls him away.

“Go on,” Rodolphus says behind him. “Finish that sentence. I’m a what?”

“Don’t finish the sentence,” Sirius says, over his shoulder, getting a glimpse of a quite frankly hilarious face off, between Rodolphus and his little, distorted, feminine version.

She does hiss something at Rodolphus, but quietly, Sirius can’t grasp it.

Rodolphus laughs.

Sirius takes Regis further away.

“How’s your mother?” he asks, as Regina grows louder in the distance.

“She’s fine.” Regis shrugs. “She doesn’t seem very happy, but she’s fine.” He lowers his gaze. “I overheard them….she didn’t want to marry, you know? But she did it for me. Mr Lestrange told her that she can take Regina and leave, but that he’ll be keeping me, so Mummy stayed-”

“Hey.” Sirius lifts Regis’ head, gently. “This isn’t your fault. I know it isn’t easy. I can imagine Rodolphus has…expectations, but he won’t hurt you, alright?” *Not much*, he thinks. *Not irreparably.*

Regis nods. His little face is already blank, determined. “Yeah. Yes.”

“It’s not easy, being heir to an old family.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” he whispers.

Sirius clasps his shoulder again. “We don’t get to choose that. We’re born and…well. It’s how it is.”

Sirius did his best to escape that burden when he was young and didn’t think he could handle it, when he *couldn’t* handle it.

And yet, a war and a stint in Azkaban later, he was right back where he started. It truly felt inescapable.

Regis nods. “I know. I mean…I know it isn’t easy. I grew up with Orion and Draco. I’ve seen them-I. Yeah. Yes. It’s not easy, but it is what it is.”

Sirius swallows. *What do you mean you grew up with Orion? You saw what?* he wants to ask, but this isn’t the time. This isn’t about him, or Orion.

“You can still get lucky and escape it. Just watch. Bella always wanted a child, and if she’ll have one, and if it’s a boy, you’re free.”

He nods again. “That’s what she said. She said I should just get along with whatever Mr Lestrange says, and that it will soon be over, once she gives him a baby.”

And won’t that be a sight? Bella, pregnant?

Sirius isn’t prepared for it.

The world isn’t.

“You can write to me, now. I’ll make sure of it. You can tell me anything. If he gets too much, or if he crosses any lines.”

Though, what will Sirius do if that happens… he’ll deal with that if it gets to it.

It does seem to make Regis happier to hear it.

“I wish I was like her,” the boy says, watching Regina still yelling at Rodolphus, hands curled into fists at her side, cheeks almost as red as her hair. “She’s not scared of anything.”

“I’m glad you’re not like her, “Sirius says. “We’d have all killed ourselves if there were two Reginas around, really.”

It makes Regis smile, finally.

“Rabastan will get better, and that will change many things, you’ll see. But you have to give him some time. You shouldn’t have to, it’s not fair, I know. But once he recovers a bit, you’ll like him.”

Sirius hugs Regis again, briefly, and then they return to Regina and Rodolphus.

Bella watches them from the balcony, but doesn’t come down. She waves at Sirius.

What a bitch, Sirius thinks, but he waves back, because…

Because it’s Bella.

When the holiday is over, Regis and Regina return to Hogwarts.

(-)

Sirius is once again woken up by a summon from the Wizengamot in the middle of the night.

There was an incident at the Ministry, deep inside the Department of Mysteries; in the Hall of Prophecies.

(-)

“You need to arrest Sturgis Podmore and Broderik Bode. They had no business being there, at night, in the Department of Mysteries. What on earth where they doing there?” Lucius says, filling Fudge’s glass with a very expensive bottle of Odgen’s finest, limited edition.

They’re in Black Manor, a private dinner. Lucius and Sirius take turns usually, for years now, in inviting Fudge over and spoiling him, bribing him, and also threatening him, depending on the situation.

“Dumbledore says Podmore was there to stop He-Who-Must- Not-Be-Named. He said they had been keeping watch on the Hall of Prophecy for months,“ Fudge whispers. “I thought Dumbledore insane, but -what if *he* is back?”

Lucius shakes his head. “So Dumbledore and his men have been infiltrating the Ministry for *months* now? They are undermining you, Cornelius. Dumbledore is coming for your position.”

“But Crouch Jr.! The mess with Azkaban, now this- Lucius, what if-”

“We’ve been over this before,” Lucius says, patiently. “The dark lord hasn’t returned, Cornelius! Do you think it would have been so peaceful out there if he was back? Come now, you remember how it was in the war. This is nothing like that! It’s Crouch and the rest of the fanatics he broke out, they’re the ones causing this. And Dumbledore is using them as an excuse to get rid of you and become Minister. He’s cajoled Moody to his side as well, haven’t you seen? Moody has a grudge agains you, and the entire Auror Department. I’m telling you, they made a deal, so Dumbledore can become Minister and name Moody as Head Auror again.”

Fudge’s eyes twitch. His fingers tighten in anger over the expensive crystal. Sirius has the urge to snatch it out of those greedy, undeserving paws. “Yes, yes, that’s what’s going on. That Dumbledore, I’m telling you, he almost got me fooled! And how dare he, have his spies in my Ministry? You’re right Lucius, I’ll have Podmore and Bode arrested. Well, if Bode survives, that is. He’s still in the hospital.”

“You’re very wise, Minister.” Lucius smiles, pleasant. “Very wise. Now, why don’t we speak about that donation to the Department of International Cooperation? We are hosting the Tournament next year, after all. We want everything to run smoothly, wouldn’t do to look bad with the foreigners here. Sirius, Corban and myself decided to help Hogwarts look its best, no expenses spared.”

“Thank you,” Fudge says. “We’re a bit tight on funds now, after the fiasco with Azkaban. I appreciate your help.”

“Of course,” Lucius says.

“More whiskey?” Sirius asks Fudge, who readily agrees, while on the other side of the room his wife lets out an awed sound when Astrid and Narcissa surprise her with a gift, a beautiful, rare jewellery set.

“What happened there?” Sirius asks when the Fudges are gone. “Bode? Isn’t he an Unspeakable?”

“The dark lord wanted to hear the prophecy in full,” Lucius says. “Rookwood told him it can’t be taken by anyone other than the ones the prophecy was made for. Dumbledore had his merry men posted around the Department, day and night, to protect it. I put Bode under the Imperius, made him touch the prophecy. As Rookwood warned us, he was instantly cursed. Podmore, who was there under an invisibility cloak, at Dumbledore’s orders, tried to help him, and in the distraction, the dark lord Apparated there and took it, with none the wiser.

The Anti Apparition wards flared, of course, and the Aurors rushed to the Department, where they found Podmore and Bode."

"And? What did Voldemort say of the prophecy?"

Lucius shrugs. "You can imagine he didn't share the contents of the prophecy with me. But he doesn't look concerned." Lucius bites his cheek, hesitates for a second. "He looks…better, actually."

"In what way?"

"It's hard to explain, but…I don't know. He seems *better*, all around. Calmer. He doesn't fly off the handle as easily as before."

Sirius swallows past the knot in his throat. "Does he still live with the Lestranges, or-"

Lucius shakes his head. "Once Rodolphus was out of Azkaban, the dark lord returned to his former home."

So he saw the gifts, all those things Sirius bought for him, for over a decade. He saw that Sirius tried to keep the home clean and well maintained.

He saw, and yet he still hasn't reached out.

(-)

Dumbledore is kicked out of the Wizengamot, all his privileges and titles removed. Lucius and the others gloat from their seats.

And, yes, while it was technically Lucius and his influence over Fudge that achieved this outcome, after trying for decades, it-

If it was directly the noble families removing Dumbledore it would be one thing.

But it's *Fudge*, talking down to Dumbledore, stripping him of his well-earned titles, even his order of Merlin, and it irks Sirius. It's reprehensible; a *nothing*, a spineless coward in a bowler hat doing that to Dumbledore. Outrageous.

The smear campaign starts in the press, dragging Dumbledore through the mud, his reputation in ruins, his name spat upon.

Was it worth it, old man? Sirius wonders, as he reads the articles. *Was sacrificing your lover, your youth, everything to save these ungrateful worms that have now turned against you because they don't like the truth you're speaking? Do you regret it?*

No, he probably doesn't. Dumbledore doesn't care about his reputation, won't hold the stupidity and treachery of the public against them. Dumbledore will just carry on doing what he thinks it's right.

"As long as you don't take my picture out from the chocolate frogs collection, I really don't mind," he said, with a smile, as Fudge stared down at him from his podium. "I shall send you my Order of Merlin back, though I will have to find it first. Hopefully, I didn't throw it away, and it's buried somewhere in my office."

Sirius wishes so hard he could hate Dumbledore. It would be so much easier. But he cannot. He likes him, he respects him.

Does this make Voldemort happy? Sirius wonders. It's his doing, for sure, his plans and strategies that Lucius put in motion to rid the Wizengamot from Dumbledore, but would Voldemort truly enjoy seeing this? Siting in that chamber and watching Fudge and Umbridge, out of all people, attempting to humiliate this great wizard that could blink them out of existence, if he was inclined to violence?

Somehow, Sirius thinks Voldemort would murder Fudge for the disrespect.

(-)

"Daddy?" The door to Sirius' office opens slightly, and Marvolo's head pops up.

Oh, this is bad. These days, Marvolo only calls him 'daddy' when he fucks up.

"Come in."

Marvolo does. Something clearly is up. He looks hesitant, uncertain. Instead of sitting on the chair in front of the desk, he comes to stand beside Sirius.

"I did something really bad, Daddy." His voice trembles. He throws himself at Sirius, hugging him tightly.

"Hey, hey." Sirius is getting worried. His sons hadn't been criers, not past toddlerhood, because Sirius had continued the practice that his own father enforced with him. Blacks do not cry. Men do not show emotions.

Marvolo can't stop crying, head buried in Sirius' robe. "I'm really sorry!"

"Tell me what happened." Sirius gently pulls the boy off to check him over. He looks uninjured.

"I was with Levi and Annie."

“Yes,” Sirius encourages, because he knew Marvolo was away to Avery’s manor with his little friends, the few that can stomach him voluntarily.

“Justinian is grounded, so we forced the house-elf to take us to Nott’s manor, so we can sneak up and see him.”

“I told you to stop doing that. Someone needs to know where you are, at all times,” Sirius says, mildly. “You can’t just fuck off without permission!”

Marvolo raises his shoulders until they’re ear level, head still bent low. “I know.”

“There’s no need to cry about it, though. Just stop doing it.” Sirius frowns. “It’s not that bad,” he adds, softly.

“It’s not that.”

Of course. Would have been too easy. “Go on.”

“We heard voices in the hallway. We couldn’t make them out, but we were curious, so we tried to figure it out.”

Sirius really needs Marvolo to stop trying to overhear conversations. It’s a weekly occurrence to find him pressed with his ear to a door.

“But as we got close, we overstepped a ward or something.”

“Yes. Privacy wards. To keep conversations *private*!” Sirius says, exasperated. “Who do I need to appease?”

Nott, that’s a given and who knows what other pompous fucker. It is highly unlikely anyone would dare complain to Sirius, but it’s only polite of him to write them and offer a non-apology in some form or other.

“We got scared, and we scattered. I ended up in Mrs. Nott’s painting room. I was waiting to find a moment to call Kreacher to get me out or try to find Levi but…but-“

He starts shaking, throwing himself in Sirius’s arms once more.

“Kiddo, just tell me, alright?”

“I never saw him before. I didn’t know who he was,” Marvolo speaks into his chest. “He asked which Black am I, so I told him because he looked kinda scary. Very tall and with r-red eyes.”

Sirius’ heart almost stops. He rips Marvolo away, holds him at arm's length, looks him over again. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?” His voice comes a little high.

“I’m not hurt. He didn’t hurt me. He-I didn’t know who he was, Daddy! I swear! I thought he was dead!”

Sirius can barely focus on what his son is saying.

“He asked me questions about our family, and I don’t know why I answered, why I stayed so long. It was just-I felt like I had to. I can’t explain it.”

Sirius knows how to explain it. His son was terrified. It was fear that kept him there. But Blacks aren’t afraid, so Marvolo won’t ever admit, even to himself, that he just froze.

“What questions?”

“What I was doing there, how is Orion like, Helix. He asked about Mummy!“ Marvolo hiccups. “Harry! And at the end, he said *“Tell your father Lord Voldemort sends his regards”*. And then he left. I didn’t know! He was supposed to be dead! I didn’t know, and I told him about Harry! Daddy-”

“Don’t cry. It’s alright.” Sirius attempts to calm down, as to not scare Marvolo further.

“I heard you and Lucius talking, last year, about how Voldemort tried to kill Harry in his first year at Hogwarts! And I went ahead and spoke of Harry-”

“You couldn’t have told him anything he didn’t already know. It doesn’t matter. You’re fine. I’m not upset with you. Harry is safe. You are sure he didn’t hurt you?”

“He didn’t. He was just very …I don’t know. *Big.* But not like you are big. I don’t know how to explain it! I never met someone so scary! And his eyes, they were so -Daddy!”

“Shh. Calm down. You’re alright.” Sirius draws him into a hug, runs his fingers through his hair, tries to focus on Marvolo, and just Marvolo.

“I didn’t cry while he was still there, I promise!” Marvolo whispers. “I didn’t shame our name!”

“You can never shame our name, no matter what you do,” Sirius whispers back. “Never worry about that. You’re my perfect, brave boy. Grown men are terrified when meeting him. But you don’t have to worry, Marvolo. You don’t have to fear anything. You’re my son, and no one on this earth would ever hurt you.”

Marvolo hugs tighter, nods. “I told him that you expect me back or otherwise you’ll come to find me! I said *“Father always finds me!”*. And when he asked if I wasn’t raised not to listen to private conversations, I said I’m not scared to get in trouble because Father will make sure to get me out!”

Sirius kisses the top of his head. “Good. See, you acted like you were supposed to when in danger, like I taught you.”

“No, because I still answered his question, and I’m not supposed to speak to strangers at all!”

No matter how Sirius attempts to reassure him, Marvolo only calms down once he decides on a punishment for himself, telling Sirius to take away his toys for a week and not allow him to see his friends for another week.

(-)

The wards still allow him passage, and Sirius' anger falters as swiftly as he Apparated.

He actually stops, mid-stride, as the wards embrace him and let him pass, overcome by an emotion so strong it even swallows his anger.

And then he sees the bike, parked where he left it, twelve years ago, just as pristine, and Sirius has to struggle really hard to remember why he was mad.

Marvolo. Marvolo crying.

Right.

He starts walking again, with purpose, his heart hammering in his chest so wildly that it makes him slightly dizzy, and then he's twisting the doorknob and marches inside.

Home, home, home, a voice says, ecstatic, but he does his best to ignore it.

Voldemort is at his desk, a book open in front of him, but watching Sirius.

It reminds him of another night when he came in, angry, hurt, having just lost Marlene, and he barged through that door, only to be met with Voldemort sat at his desk, a book in front of him.

That brings along the memory of what he did, after, pushed Voldemort into a wall, fucked him, wanting to hurt him-

Sirius' anger drains away yet again, dissipates completely.

Marvolo. Crying! He tries to hold on to that.

But it's hard. Placed around the house, all those gifts Sirius bought for Voldemort are now on display.

A special globe of the earth he found in China, that illustrates the areas where magical creature live in several colours; it is now crammed between the piano and a bookshelf.

On top of the piano, there's a deck of cards Sirius found in muggle Prague, each card hand-painted after important muggle leaders through the ages. When Sirius saw it, he immediately thought Voldemort was the only bookworm who would appreciate such a thing.

On the desk, there's the ashtray Sirius bought in Moscow, a marvel of black marble and rubies, with an ancient inscription on the bottom that only becomes visibility when in contact with ash.

And on the mantlepiece-

Focus!

“If you touch one of my children, if you even look at them, I’m going to kill you so thoroughly, not even a shadow will be left of you,” he says. Sadly, he doesn’t sound as angry as he wanted to sound. “Play your stupid war games, torment whoever you want, but if you go near my-”

“I didn’t harm the boy,” Voldemort says, still seated, eyes roaming over Sirius. He doesn’t sound angry, either, even if Sirius threatened to murder him.

And he would. If his children - he can’t even imagine it. He would blow the earth apart.

However.

He knows, deep down, he knows Voldemort wouldn’t hurt his children. He doesn’t know why he believes it so fiercely, but he does.

“I didn’t seek him, he found me.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Sirius hisses, stepping closer. “If one of them falls out of the sky into your lap, you just put them aside, *gently*, and go on your way. Got it?”

“You named him after me,” Voldemort says, quietly.

And then he stands.

All pretence of anger is gone.

Sirius used his son, his crying, scared son, as an excuse to finally seek Voldemort out, relish in his presence once more.

“I was possessed,” he mutters.

He wasn’t, not anymore, not by the time Marvolo was born.

An eyebrow quirks up on that striking face. “No part of me, however corrupted, would influence you to name a child M- that.”

“I almost named him Tom,” Sirius pushes, prods, reckless, giddy with anticipation. “But it’s such a common, simple name, I couldn’t make myself, in the end.”

Voldemort doesn’t react to that either. He so rarely reacted to Sirius’ stupid attempts to anger him.

A few times, in the very beginning. Never, since.

Always patient with Sirius, always understanding.

And yet since he came back, he ignores Sirius, forgot about him-

The bike is here. The wards let you pass. He didn't forget you.

But he ignores me. How long would he have ignored me, if I didn't seek him out? Forever?

Will he ever forgive me for abandoning him to such a terrible fate?

He's still….he still feels *something* for Sirius, he must, what with the bike and all, but that doesn't mean he wants to see him.

Sirius loved him for eleven years; that didn't mean he forgave him, that he wanted to see him. It took so much time to forgive him, and he'd have been devastated if Voldemort strolled back into his life when Sirius wasn't ready to face him again.

Sirius steps back. He shouldn't force his presence on Voldemort. Lucius and Bella were right; he should be patient, give him time, let him decide when he wants to let Sirius into his life again.

All his instincts scream at him to go closer, to kiss him, hold him-

He takes another step back. "It's settled then. Stay away from my kids!"

He makes himself turn, takes the single step that separates him from the door-

The door slams shut.

Sirius still tries to turn the knob, uselessly.

For a second, he feels uneasy. Not afraid, not exactly, but reminded of Voldemort's power.

An animal always realises when it's trapped somewhere, and Padfoot panics inside him, because he knows there's no way out.

Sirius panics for different reasons than Padfoot. Sirius panics because if he can't leave, then he might not be able to help himself, and he'll grab Voldemort, kiss him, snarl in his face he's not allowed to ignore Sirius the way he had.

"Open it," he demands, without turning.

"No."

Voldemort speaks the word into his *ear*. He's that close, and Sirius hadn't heard him approach.

If Sirius was to take a deep breath, his back would touch Voldemort's chest-

"Open the fucking door," he repeats.

It's Voldemort that makes them touch, stepping forward, making contact and Sirius grows mad with want, and panic, and so many feelings he'd forgotten he could experience.

He turns, abruptly, and then crowds himself into the door, to put distance between them, even an inch.

This close, he has to look a bit up to find Voldemort's eyes.

They haven't gotten less impressive, nor less terrifying.

No less intelligent.

No less beautiful.

"What?" Sirius asks. He meant to demand, but he just whispered the word. "What do you want?" he asks, again.

"I was wondering," Voldemort says, and now they're touching again, chest to chest, "if you'd like to have dinner with me."

Am I dreaming?

He often days dreams of Voldemort. Very often. Mopes around, thinking of him, sits uselessly in his office, parchments opened in front of him, ignored, as he thinks of this man.

Perhaps Marvolo never came in. Perhaps it's all an elaborate fantasy, and he's asleep in his office.

"Dinner? You didn't call me for over a year and now you want dinner?" Sirius clarifies, because- *what?*

"You told me once, how did you put it?" Voldemort's right arm comes to rest against the wall, inches from Sirius' head. He leans in closer. "You insinuated it wasn't a good idea to mix business with pleasure."

The last word settles between them, echos, *burns.*

"I cut the business part out of it. And I did tell you I wouldn't use the Mark for personal reasons, didn't I?"

Sirius struggles to swallow. His mouth had gone dry. His mind is racing.

He remembers that conversation that seems to have happened in other life entirely; that seems to have happened yesterday.

"*I wear your Mark," Sirius makes himself say it, a last ditched effort his sanity is attempting in order to get him out of whatever this is. "You expect me to obey you. It can get messy. When my Mark burns, you expect me to show up. I don't have the option not to come."*

"I will never use the Mark for personal reasons. In fact, to even it out, I will let you initiate these sorts of encounters. I realise I am hard to approach, so I am giving you permission to do so."

“You could have sent me a fucking letter, then,” he says.

Voldemort smiles.

He *smiles*, and that does it. It’s done. Relief washes over Sirius, mixes with agitation, anticipation.

He’s smiling. Sirius dreamed of that smile for so many years. It’s exactly as he remembers it: overwhelming, eclipsing everything around them, mesmerising.

I had no chance, Sirius thinks, absolving himself. There’s nothing in this world quite like Voldemort deciding Sirius is worth that smile. It disarms Sirius now, so there was never any hope of resisting it when he was twenty.

He remembers everything about Voldemort, yet his memories could never quite recreate the way magic felt around him, the way air itself seems charged, reacting to his indomitable presence.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be receptive to such an invitation.” His voice, too, was never quite the same in his memory. There’s a unique experience in hearing it, as opposed to remembering it. Even Tom…the Horcrux had only a drop of Voldemort’s immense charisma. “But since you came here…” he trails off, and every word is the right cadence, tailored perfectly to draw Sirius in.

“To threaten to kill you,” Sirius reminds him. “That made you think I am receptive?”

“Yes. Was I wrong?”

No.

“You dress differently,” Voldemort says, and his eyes leave Sirius’ for the first time, travel down, but quickly return to hold his gaze. “I hear you do not play the piano anymore.” Fleeting sadness crosses his features. “You cut your hair.” The words are laced with regret.

I’m growing it back, Sirius thinks. It’s already at his shoulders.

He thinks of his mother, tying her hair to cut his father’s access to it, whenever she was mad at him, because she knew it would hurt him, because despite everything she knew he loved her. He thinks of how she has kept it tied back, for years, to punish him for dying, leaving her behind.

He thinks of his father, smiling at Sirius, saying *‘you are so much like your mother’*.

“But I assume you still eat, don’t you?”

“I live off of spite,” Sirius says. “And yes, an occasional meal.”

“And would you share a meal with me?”

“Yes.”

There was never any another answer he could give. There is no hesitation.

“Then I shall see you Tuesday.” Voldemort lingers a moment longer, before he retreats. “Like old times.”

The lock on the door clicks open.

And now it’s Sirius that lingers in the doorway, unable to rip his eyes away from him.

Gods, but he looks- the same, yes. But better, too. *More.* It’s hard to look away.

It is hard for anyone; an entire country couldn’t look away from Voldemort. When he’s around, people watch him. It’s unavoidable. People went to war for this man, they renounced their freedom, they died for him. But it’s even harder for Sirius, specifically, to look away. Because he knows the man behind the dark lord. He’s aware of the poor orphan hiding behind the genius, of the powerless boy behind the most powerful wizard alive. Sirius is aware of the fear and pain behind the boldness, the confidence Voldemort exudes. Sirius saw the insecurities behind the arrogance.

Tuesday, he tells himself. That’s only two days away. He can make it two more days.

He closes the door behind him.

He knows Dumbledore is right. Love is the strongest force of nature; it does move mountains.

Love will conquer everything. It will erase betrayal, it will heal the pain it caused, it forgives the unforgivable.

Sirius goes to his bike, straddles it without hesitation, without clumsiness, as if he last rode it the day before, and not more than a decade prior.

He feels the stasis charm fall from it, and Sirius turns the key, left in the ignition. It roars to life, just like that. Just because Voldemort’s magic kept the bike secluded in an invisible bubble, made it timeless even as years flew by, kept is safe, unmarred by time.

And something inside Sirius, something that was locked behind an invisible wall, that stopped feeling on that Halloween night, now breaks free, too, as Sirius steers the bike towards the sky.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you that read the chapter fast, I want to let you know 40 minutes after posting I realised I forgot to add a scene! So you can read back, the beginning of the chapter, I added Albus' POV! I am so sorry, I didn't sleep last night while editing and I forgot to include it when I posted!

Sirius found his heart shaped, rose coloured glasses so he can wear them whenever he sees Voldemort 😂

As always, thank you for reading and if you'd have the time to share your thoughts with me, I'd love to read it! ❤️

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You have to keep this a secret," Sirius tells Marvolo. "I know you're bad at that, but this time you can't slip up. It's not simple gossip."

Marvolo nods, determined. "I won't tell anyone, I promise!"

"It's a matter of great importance. I'm glad you found out, instead of Orion or Harry. You're my favourite boy, and I know I can trust you with this," Sirius goes on, knowing flattery gets him a long way with Marvolo.

"You can!"

Sirius nods. "Good. Imagine, not even the Minister for Magic knows. You're one of the very few trusted with this information."

What was Voldemort thinking, revealing himself to a child? If he'd have learned of Marvolo's penchant for gossip, he'd have thought twice about it.

Sirius cannot wait to tell him all about Marvolo.

It's been over an hour since he left Voldemort's home, and his heart is still pounding wildly.

"Oh, wow! But how did he come back without anyone noticing?"

Because the Ministry is full of incompetent sheep. "He's very clever, that's how. And he trusts you with this secret now. Not many people are in his good graces-"

"Me? He trusts me?" Marvolo's eyes go as big as Dobby's for a second. He's all flushed. "How do you know?"

"He told me."

"You talked to him already? But I've only just told you about it!"

"Of course I talked to him. You think anyone scares my kid without getting a scolding?"

"I was not scared!" Marvolo hisses. "Did you tell him I was scared? *Father!* He'll think me a little boy now! Blacks don't get scared!"

"It's fine, you can get scared up until you turn eleven," Sirius says, to mollify him.

“You scolded the dark lord?!” Marvolo shakes his head. “For me?”

Well, Sirius didn’t exactly scold him, but whatever. “I’d move mountains for you,” he says, and Marvolo jumps out of his chair to hug Sirius. “I also got something back, something I left with him before he …went away. Wanna see it?”

“Yes, please!”

“Alright, then put on some muggle clothes and-”

“No! I can’t get out! I’m not allowed!”

Right. He forgot Marvolo punished himself for speaking to Voldemort.

“Really, kid, there’s no need-”

“No, no! I did something wrong and now I can’t joy anything for a week!”

“But do I have to pay for it? I would enjoy it if you came with me, you know.”

“Oh.” Marvolo bites his lip, conflicted. “Alright, then, I’ll come. But whatever it is, I won’t enjoy it, I promise, I’ll just do it for you!”

Despite all his attempts to punish himself, Marvolo ends up enjoying the bike quite a lot. Not more than Sirius, though.

He always loved his bike, but sharing this with his son is…different.

“Father bought it for me,” Sirius says, when they’re in the air, and he’s trying to show Marvolo how to steer it. “I was a bit older than you, and he hated all things muggle, but I wanted it, and he got it for me. He helped me with many of the enchantments.”

“You always get me everything I want, too,” Marvolo says.“Father, this isn’t a secret, right?”

“It isn’t.”

“Yes! I can’t wait to tell Orion and Harry I got on the bike first! They’ll die of jealousy!”

(-)

Tuesday feels like the longest day of his life; time simply refuses to progress, no matter how many times Sirius checks his watch.

It’s been so long since Sirius felt nervous. He cannot recall many occasions in the past decade where he felt nervous or didn’t already know how a meeting would end even before he started it.

It makes him jittery.

He *likes* it. It's not necessarily a pleasant feeling, yet he enjoys it, because it's not boring. It's not predictable.

That's the thing with Voldemort- it's always exciting.

Even in those last months, in the war, when he was at his most…domestic, when they wouldn't leave the cabin for three days in a row, there was always excitement.

It used to feel safe, and peaceful, Sirius felt secure around him, always, but it was still exciting, because the man is …well, he's Voldemort.

He could cook and joke with Sirius one moment, and then some Death Eater would call him through the Mark, and off he went, solving complicated issues with the war, plotting something, or straight up murdering his enemies, and he'd come back to Sirius and continue on as if they had no interruption at all.

There was never a dull moment, even when *nothing* happened. When they'd just talk, or listen to music, or read; Voldemort always had something interesting and unexpected to say, an unique perspective that would blow Sirius' mind, leave him thinking about it for days or weeks on end.

He challenged Sirius, made him want to read more, research more, know more, find out more, more more more. But it was always *fun.*

It wasn't a pressure, it wasn't a test.

Sirius had fun trying to figure out who Albert Einstein was, or whatever unexpected muggle thing Voldemort would mention in passing, that made Sirius want to hunt that knowledge down. And it always ended up being something Sirius expected the least. After the Einstein debacle, Sirius would think to research smart famous muggles when Voldemort would mention something he had no clue about, only to eventually learn Voldemort was referencing a child's story, or he was quoting a lyric from some obscure song.

To say nothing of their duels, and the way Sirius would try to find old, dangerous spells, attempting to, if not surprise Voldemort, at least impress him.

No one had ever challenged Sirius in that manner. Not before Voldemort, and certainly not after.

The older he got, the harder it got for anyone to catch Sirius' interest, let alone keep it. The harder it got to surprise Sirius.

Well, his kids manage to *shock* him on occasion, but that's a different thing.

Evidently, Voldemort is still exciting, since Sirius' stomach is all in knots with anticipation.

But what if I become boring?

After all, he's no longer a reckless, wild twenty-year-old. Sirius hadn't been spontaneous in years. Not only did his interests not evolve, they all just…died.

When Sirius thinks back on what he did in the past ten years- sure, he got a wife, and a bunch of children, but that's hardly impressive, even if he considers it his biggest accomplishment and the only one that made life worth it.

He accumulated an even greater wealth than he inherited, bullied politicians with Lucius, bribed or threatened his way through the Ministry, but that won't really impress Voldemort either, will it?

Sure, Sirius is considered a tad more eccentric than his peers, more dangerous, but at the end of the day, he's not so much different from many other Heads of old families. People often tell him he's grown up like his father, and they mean it as a compliment, and Sirius certainly takes it as a compliment, but when Voldemort said it, it didn't sound like one.

At the very best, his Mother or some other older people compare him to old Sirius. That man was certainly exciting, wasn't he?

(-)

Voldemort opens the door before Sirius can knock.

Once again, he has the thought that Voldemort looks *better*. Perhaps it's because for so long Sirius was haunted by the image of him dead, so seeing him alive and well automatically has the effect of him looking better.

Perhaps it's just the robe; one of the ones Sirius got for him, so long ago. Black, as he enjoys, simple looking at a glance, but Sirius remembers hounding the poor tailor with very precise instructions.

He steps aside, and Sirius walks past him, inside the house, resists the impulse to push him into the door and snog him.

His…*nerves*, or whatever the fuck was wrong with him earlier, no longer plague him.

He feels at ease as soon as he's surrounded by the very familiar room.

A glass of whiskey already waits for Sirius on the coffee table, and Sirius sits, because he doesn't trust himself standing near Voldemort, doesn't trust his hands- better he has something to hold.

There's a pack of cigarettes too, and an ashtray.

It makes him remember Tom used to smoke, long before Voldemort first stole one of Sirius' fags.

Don't think of that. Sirius should not think of the Horcruxes and all the information he got from them. It feels wrong to know it, since Voldemort didn't volunteer it.

"I heard you still enjoy drinking," Voldemort says, sitting on the armchair, where he always used to sit.

"He interrogates people about you," Lucius assured Sirius.

"Nothing would stop me from that," Sirius says. "They tried for a while, but it didn't stick."

Sadly, he truly is his mother's son, because despite all their collective efforts, she hadn't stopped drinking, either. But it's different. It isn't like before, when she'd drink alone in Grimmauld, sad and bitter. At least now she seems happier, she's more outgoing, even if most of the time she only goes to Malfoy Manor.

Voldemort picks up his own glass, and Sirius notices the ring, the Horcrux, is back on his finger.

He swallows, conflicted. Sirius still feels possessive of that ring, still feels connected to it. And not just because the magical bond that formed when it possessed him, but because wearing it used to mean something, a symbol of his closeness to Voldemort.

It's also the Resurrection Stone, but that's the least interesting thing about it.

"Do you-" Sirius stops himself. He shouldn't open with that, should he?

Yeah, like you can have small talk with Voldemort after everything, he mocks himself.

"Yes?" Voldemort's intense gaze has never left him, and it makes Sirius -

Happy. Above all other feelings it awakes inside him, it makes him happy.

Well, fuck it. We'll have to talk about it eventually.

"The ring." Sirius takes a sip of his drink. "Do you know- does it tell you what- do you remember what it remembers?"

Voldemort's gaze is so hungry, no other word for it.

Yeah, I still got it, Sirius thinks, pleased. He might not be as wild or interesting as he was a decade ago, but apparently Voldemort is still very much interested.

"No. I told you, it is simply a dark artefact. It is not a person, it doesn't think, nor does it remember anything. It's only purpose is to guard my life. It has no autonomy."

It certainly didn't feel that way, but…while Horcrux Tom seemed very much real, his only drive, his only purpose, was, indeed, finding Voldemort.

“He- it must have some autonomy, surely. It spoke to me.”

Voldemort looks curious now. Sirius loves that glint in his eyes, that tiny frown. “That is part of its enchantments. The ability to possess, to influence.” He takes a sip of his drink, and Sirius is jealous of the glass, that gets to touch his lips. He watches, fascinated, as the amber liquid goes past them, and then Voldemort swallows, and Sirius’s lower abdomen constricts with desire. “To manipulate,” Voldemort goes on. “But it certainly won’t exercise those powers with me. So no, I do not know what it did to you. What it told you. Though I would be curious to learn. After all, I haven’t met anyone that lived through a Horcrux possession. If it even happened to anyone else, then it wasn’t recorded anywhere.”

Sirius opens his mouth, but Voldemort keeps going.

“However, I am given to understand it wasn’t a particularly pleasant experience for you, and I wouldn’t want you to relive it.”

Sirius snorts. Of course Bella told Voldemort all about it.

“It wasn’t that bad, really.” *Everything* else was bad- the fact that he was so alone, Voldemort and James gone, and the horrible way it transpired, the fresh marks Azkaban left on him, the way he didn’t understand what was happening around him, the strange young girl that he was suddenly married to, the new baby that caused Sirius so much internal conflict- all of it was bad. But not the Horcrux. That one was what kept him alive.

Even if Sirius sometimes- rarely- has nightmares of Tom, and the way it took control from Sirius…he never regretted any of it.

“The diary was different, though,” Sirius says. “Even if it didn’t posses me, it still spoke to me. That one definitely has some autonomy.”

Voldemort’s eyebrow rises high on his forehead. He leans in closer. “You wrote in it?”

“Yeah.”

“You wrote in it, *after* you were possessed by another Horcrux? *After* you knew the power they can exercise over you?”

Voldemort seems annoyed, surprised and pleased all at once, the emotions quickly flickering on his face, chasing one another.

“Well….yeah.”

“Why?”

Because I missed you. He doesn’t say it, but he thinks the words fly between them, unspoken. Voldemort leans back into the armchair. He takes another sip of whiskey.

“I was curious. And older. More experienced. This time, I knew how to guard against possession.”

In all truth, Sirius knew how to do that with the ring, as well. He realised the signs early on; the dreams, the way it made him sleep so much, the little whispers in his ear, long before Tom took control fully.

Sirius was never a stranger to dark magic. He knew it was happening, and he had all the time to stop it. To pull the ring off, to use Occlumency, to ask for help. But he hadn't.

"You suicidal fool," Tom called him.

"It does have autonomy," Sirius says, softly. "It has…feelings," he adds carefully.

"It has memories I gave it," Voldemort counters. "It can mimic feelings. Its enchantments were different from the others. It was meant to persuade someone into opening the Chamber in my stead."

"Did you write in it?"

"Obviously."

"No, no. I mean after you turned it into a Horcrux."

Voldemort blinks. "Why would I do that?"

Sirius shrugs. He empties his glass in one go- or intends to. The glass refills, even as Sirius is drinking.

Oh, how he missed Voldemort's magic, more steady and subtle than any other wizard's.

"Aren't you at least curious?" he asks.

He hopes Voldemort is right. He really hopes the Diary, especially, has no feelings, that it just mimics them very well.

He really hopes there is no lost, hurt little boy trapped there, between its pages, all alone, for eternity.

The problem is that Sirius feels he knows more of how Horcrux work, since he actually interacted with them, as opposed to Voldemort, who was only ever interested in making them, in their purpose of tethering him to life, and nothing else.

Voldemort is smiling now, that secret smile reserved just for Sirius. "You know what they say about curiosity. It killed the cat."

"Luckily, I'm a dog."

Voldemort laughs, that deep, rich sound that goes straight inside Sirius' chest, touches his heart, makes it beat faster.

"It wasn't how you put it- we didn't plot against you; Bella, Lucius and I. I don't want you to think that," Sirius says, softly. "We didn't speak of the Horcruxes. Not ever. Lucius simply

gave it to me a couple of years ago because his Manor was no longer safe; there was this stupid law passed- we overthrew it now, it's fine- but back then, the Ministry got drunk on power and was raiding Manors of former Death Eaters. Grimmauld is Unplottable, so Lucius only meant to protect the Diary. And Bella- Bella only gave hers up mere weeks before I - before I sent Barty for you. She only agreed to hand it over once I assured her my intentions were for you to have it. We didn't plot or-"

"I know."

"Alright, then."

Another short break. Voldemort tilts his head to the side, and Sirius remembers Tom from the ring doing the same gesture-

"And the locket?"

Sirius looks away. "Yeah, that is…" he trails off.

"You lied to me. You lied to me before our…disagreement."

Is that how we're calling it, *disagreement*? Sirius almost barks at him.

"We were on good terms, weren't we? I gave you no cause to distrust me, and yet you lied to me. You told me the elf was dead. You shared my table, my bed, and all that time, you were lying. Why?"

It's so hard to admit it. *So* hard. But he has to. This is the man he loves; loves so deeply that betrayal, and murder, and a decade apart hadn't in any way lessened his feelings. A man that is, unfortunately, prone to paranoia; a man that trusts no one. And the only person he trusted….Sirius lied to him.

"When Kreacher came back and told me what happened, took me back to the cave, I realised what the locket was," Sirius says.

"How?"

"I…I don't know. I just had a feeling. How protected it was, the way you were so cavalier with the safety of the ring- I figured the locket must be another Horcrux. A back-up, so to speak. And, mind you, you didn't react very well when I told you I figured out the ring was a Horcrux."

Oh, how furious and scared Voldemort was, how he immediately attacked Sirius with Legilimency, his will and magic so *strong* it overwhelmed Sirius' mind immediately, broke through all those Occlumency shields that Sirius was proud of, that Sirius was arrogant enough to think would help protect him. They didn't.

"I imagined you'd react even worse if I told you I know of your other one- at that time, I thought you only had the two. I thought if I told you I discovered that one as well, you would…"

Silence falls. Sirius drinks some more.

“I would what?” Voldemort’s voice is soft, so soft Sirius strains to hear it. He still can’t look at him.

He bends and takes out a cigarette. Before he can light it, Voldemort does it for him, flames flickering into existence, then just as quickly flickering out.

“That you’d kill me,” Sirius says, once he takes a drag. He still can’t admit even to himself that he was genuinely afraid. “That you’d kill my family, because you’d think Kreacher maybe told them, as well.”

Another long stretch of silence.

“So, I ordered him to never speak of it and banished him to France.”

“I would have killed you,” Voldemort admits, just as softly as before, and finally Sirius looks at him, meets those steady, intelligent, beautiful eyes. He sees more of Tom’s eyes in them. He sees more brown, warmer than he remembers before his encounters with the Horcruxes.

I’ll really never stop seeing Tom in him now, will I?

“I know,” Sirius says, just as softly. “So that’s why I lied. It was nothing against you, it wasn’t to deceive you, I was simply guarding my life. You understand that, surely. You, of all people.”

Sirius is happy the last sentence didn’t come out like a reproach.

They both remember when Sirius begged him to spare Harry. They both remember Voldemort’s answer.

“Please.” He begs, for the first time since they have known each other. He walks closer, touches Voldemort again, tries to take his hand. “Please, don’t.”

For a second, Voldemort softens. He looks at Sirius, conflicted. And then it’s gone, just like that, his face settles in that blank expression, and he steps back again.

“I have to. I will not risk it. I will not risk my life, in any way.”

But Sirius forgave him. He knew, when he decided to bring Voldemort back, that he *must* forgive him fully, that he must let go of all resentment, otherwise he shouldn’t go ahead with it.

His mother used to do that; she’d pretend, from time to time, that she forgave his father. She’d call him back home, she’d love him again, and things were *so* good between them, it filled the house with happiness and relief. His father wouldn’t leave to spend time at Black Manor anymore, there were no more women, Regulus would smile, his mother would laugh, and everything was perfect.

And then the reproaches started, the jibes at his father, the snide remarks, the bitterness, and eventually the screams. And he'd leave once more.

Over, and over and over again.

"If you want to forgive him, then forgive him!" Sirius once heard Cygnus yelling at his mum. *"You can't do this back and forth, you cannot extend him grace just to take it back! If you can't forgive him, then leave him be! Do you not understand that nothing, nothing in the world can destabilise this man, that he is an unflinching block of stone, a pillar of stability? That we all depend on him to protect our family, our way of life? But then you come, and you play with his heart, with the carrot and the stick, call him back home, send him away, call him back, banish him- stop it! Just stop it! Forgive him, or don't, but stop playing with him!*

Sirius forgave. It took him a decade- well, it took him less, really, but the *resentment* lingered, and he knew that if he were to have brought Voldemort back five years after that Samhain night, or six, or seven- he knew he'd end up like his mother, that he'd always hold it against Voldemort, that he'd bring him back only to push him away, only to throw it in his face at the first argument.

But after the Diary, the resentment was gone. Sirius knew he was ready to offer full forgiveness.

And now he can stay here, with Voldemort, he can want and love him, and he can do it with no resentment, no reproach.

Voldemort nods. "I do understand."

"Good." Sirius offers him a tentative smile.

"Yet last year you were no longer afraid to show me you found them all," Voldemort goes on. "You gathered all of them- or at least the ones you could, and you laid them around me."

Sirius nods. "I'm not afraid anymore. You were right, when you told me I'll grow into my powers one day. I did."

"You certainly did."

"Are you afraid of me, Sirius?" Voldemort once asked, in this very house, in the bedroom.

And Sirius didn't know how to answer, didn't know if he was or not, not really. He remembers how displeased Voldemort looked when Sirius tried to express what he felt, without admitting to himself or to Voldemort that there was some fear, deep down, some understanding of Voldemort's immense power, and how Sirius was so defenceless against it.

He remembers even going to Bellatrix, when Draco was born, anxious after a nightmare he had where Voldemort wouldn't allow him to leave. He remembers not being able to even express to her that he did have some anxieties about it, but she understood, anyway.

A soft chime comes from the kitchen, and Voldemort puts down his glass and stands.

“Dinner is ready. Shall we?”

When Sirius enters the kitchen, he realises how much he missed the smell of a cooked meal. Of a meal *Voldemort* cooked.

It’s so…comforting.

And it does smell delicious.

The kitchen is spotless and in order again, as opposed to how Sirius used it, as a place to deposit all his gifts, until there was no more room for them.

He shivers when he remembers how cold the house was; how deserted, unwelcoming almost. Because Voldemort was not there. Because the kitchen didn’t smell like anything.

Voldemort serves him roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The glasses filled with red wine are chilled perfectly.

Sirius ate in the best restaurants in the world, he has Kreacher at home who not only perfected the art of cooking in his six hundred years on earth, but knows precisely what Sirius enjoys most.

And yet nothing is as good as the first bite of a simple, traditional roast beef. Nothing ever will be as good, he knows.

It makes him emotional, scared in a way because he *cannot* lose this again. He really doesn’t know how he managed to survive without Voldemort, without the cabin, and the food he made for Sirius- he’s surprised he pulled through the past decade, now that he has it again. He’s surprised he was able to force himself to eat once Voldemort was gone.

He certainly lost his enjoyment of a good meal, now that he thinks back on it. He ate, sure, but…it didn’t really matter what he ate anymore, did it? It was all the same to him. How could he truly enjoy it, when he either paid a faceless stranger in a restaurant for it, or poor Kreacher, with no choice in the matter, unable to refuse and brainwashed for centuries into taking pleasure serving the Blacks, made it?

“It’s made with love,” Voldemort once mocked him, when Sirius asked him how on earth he made tea taste so good.

Sirius hasn’t touched tea since ‘81.

For a few minutes, they eat in silence. Once Sirius manages to pull himself out of his saccharine musings, he notices Voldemort actually eats, this time.

He didn’t used to, before. Oh, he’d have a plate in front of him, often, with a tiny amount of food on it, and he’d play with it, take a few bites, here and there, but mostly ignored it, preferred to watch Sirius eat.

Yet now he eats, normally.

For some reason, this somehow makes Sirius happier than the meal itself.

And sad.

Poor man lived as a ghost for a decade. Perhaps he realised not to take eating for granted; perhaps he is so desperate to feel any sensation again, any taste, or smell or touch, after so long without.

“Did you like the cookbook?” Sirius asks. He remembers buying one, on a whim, in Sicily, because it reminded him of Voldemort, reminded him of a few nights when Voldemort made pasta for Sirius.

Everything reminded him of Voldemort, from the most mundane things to the most extraordinary.

He doesn’t know how to tell Voldemort this, how to explain there wasn’t a *single* moment when he wasn’t on Sirius’ mind, in some form or another.

“I did, yes. I enjoyed all your gifts.”

Sirius nods. “Good. I- good.”

“So.” Voldemort puts down his fork. Apparently he’s eaten his fill already. *Oh, well.* It was charming as long as it lasted. “Tell me, what have you been doing these past years? We both know what I was doing, after all, not much on my end.”

That *is* said with reproach. But Sirius prepared himself for it; he knew Voldemort wasn’t going to be as forgiving as Sirius.

It’s a miracle he got over it enough to have this again, to speak to Sirius, cook for him.

He’ll never let it go, however, that Sirius abandoned him. But it’s alright. Sirius accepted it already, is willing to deal with it.

To *truly* deal with it; his father eventually always lost patience with his mother’s constant reproaches and ugly remarks, but Sirius won’t.

“Not much, really,” he says. “Travelled, meddled with the Ministry, fancy parties. That sort of thing.”

Voldemort gives him a doubtful, but amused, look. “Executing an entire family, here and there?”

Sirius waves it away. “That only happened once.”

“Killing Aurors, Hit Patrollers-”

Sirius waves that away, too. “Well, not like I did it personally.”

“Building yourself a werewolf army-”

“I wasn’t building an army,” Sirius insists. Lucius and Nott called it the same, long ago. In fact, it’s why they agreed to help Sirius with securing land for the pack. “I simply wanted to give them a home. Protection. And, if Greyback requested to …assist me with some matters as a show of gratitude, then why refuse him? You know how he hates pity or being in someone’s debt.”

“Hmm.” Voldemort picks up his fork again. “I don’t remember this altruistic side of you. You were indifferent, at best, to the plight of lesser beings.”

Sirius swallows his food, takes a sip of wine. “I felt compelled to honour your promise to them. I wasn’t making myself an army. I was saving it for you. ”

He was, wasn’t he? That odd impulse and determination he had to honour Voldemort’s pact with the wolves. It did come out of *nowhere*, after all. How invested he was, how much pressure he put on Lucius to get on board. And for what? What did he care about the pack?

“And yet Greyback, now that I have called on him, made it clear his allegiance is to you, not me.”

Great. Fucking Greyback and his loyalty. Voldemort was already paranoid Sirius was too powerful with his astral magic, that Sirius might turn against him, and now the stupid werewolf had to tell him-

“I’ll speak with him, remind him he is under your command, not mine.”

“Yes, I suggest you do that.”

After his grandfather died, no one dared *suggest* to Sirius what to do.

And yet, he doesn’t mind it, now.

I’ll let him step all over me, won’t I? It occurs to Sirius.

He has a brief moment of doubt, of annoyance, before he shrugs it off. *As long as he steps gently, with care.*

Silence falls again, but it isn’t tense. It’s not peaceful, it’s filled with so many things, anticipation most of all, but it isn’t tense in a bad way.

They eat some more, until Sirius, filled to the brim with so many things he wants to tell Voldemort, so many things he had wanted to share with him during the year, as soon as they happened, bursts out, “Mother is sleeping with Abraxas.”

It has the intended effect of shocking Voldemort. Once more, he puts down his fork, and his eyes are widened slightly with genuine surprise.

“Walburga?” he asks, dumbfounded.

“Yes, that’s my mother,” Sirius teases.

“And Abraxas survived it?”

It makes Sirius laugh. *Gods, this is perfect.*

“She’s not a succubus!”

“I don’t mean just survived *her*. But you. You and Regulus. I would have thought it would bother you, what with -well.”

“Oh, it bothers Regulus, alright,” Sirius says, with a grin. “He can’t stand it. I heard Lucius teases him about it when I’m not around. He even went to yell at Abraxas, made an embarrassing scene.” Sirius shakes his head, still shocked Regulus lost it quite like that. “He’s lucky he’s my brother, otherwise he’d have never left Malfoy Manor alive, not after reportedly throwing a statuette at Abraxas’ face.”

“And you?” Voldemort’s smile is back in place, and it *melts* Sirius. “Years ago, you’d have done much worse to Abraxas if you’d have known he was courting your mother.”

Sirius shrugs. “Yeah. But I understand her better now. And yes, all right, I’m still somewhat offended on my father’s behalf, but I figure he’ll deal with Abraxas, eventually. No need for me to interfere.”

“Such trust you have in an afterlife.”

What a baffling thing to say. Sirius puts his fork down, too. “You know there is one. You’ve seen the ghosts-”

“Certainly. But they have no idea what lies beyond. They, in themselves, are an afterlife. A very limited one. We have no proof of another.”

Oh, we do. It’s on your finger.

“We call upon the dead on -” Sirius hesitates, then realises he can’t avoid that word forever, can’t tiptoe around it. He made his choice. He forgave. He wouldn’t have hesitated to use it, *before*. “On Samhain. We call upon the-”

“You use dark magic. A ritual. *Something* answers, but you have no idea if it is the real thing, or simply a result of dark magic, that, as you know, can tell you what you wish to hear, or even what you do not wish to hear, because it knows everything you feel, since you are the one that brings forth the magic, that controls it.”

Even if I tell him about the stone, he’ll probably say the same thing about it. That I didn’t really saw Father, but I saw what I wanted to see.

“I believe in it. I know it’s there. And I fully trust my father will make Abraxas regret everything.”

Voldemort hums, apparently in no mood to discus the afterlife further. “He once threatened to blind Abraxas; it was also over Walburga.”

"*What?* Really?"

"We were at Hogwarts. I don't know how he managed it, but Abraxas made Walburga cry."

"No!" Sirius cannot believe anyone would make his mother cry. In *public!*

"In the middle of the night, I woke up to find Orion looming over Abraxas, wand out, pressed under his eye, threatening all sorts of things. He couldn't have been much older than twelve, I don't think, but Abraxas took him seriously."

It's been so many years since someone told him something like this about his father. Something…*cute*, for lack of a better word. Something about his father, as a child, same age as Sirius' eldest is now.

Another thing he missed about Voldemort- these type of stories that only he could tell now. Not like Sirius can make himself speak to Abraxas for more than ten minutes at a time, and his mother gets either mad or depressed on the rare occasions she speaks about her youth.

"I remember once- not very clearly, I was so young, but Bella and Lucius were fighting, and I remember wanting to help, but he was too tall, and all I could do was bite his leg. So I did."

"A rite of passage, then. All Black men have to defend a cousin from a Malfoy."

Sirius laughs. "Oh! So that's where Helix gets it." It just dawned on him. "Biting people, I mean."

"Helix is your youngest," Voldemort says. He doesn't *ask*, he says it.

"And he's a biter. Just realised where he got from. We can't make him stop. Not that I try too hard, to be honest. He never bites me, so I think it's funny, mostly."

"I don't hear much about him."

He wouldn't. After all, there are plenty of people that know Harry, Orion, and Marvolo, but few that know Helix. Even Bella- she didn't spend much time with him in the past year and a half, busy with Voldemort and now her husband.

"He's perfect. Just turned three. Mum was worried a few months ago that he wasn't really talking as much as he should, but now he started and he won't shut up."

Helix doesn't realise when he's speaking English or Norwegian, which endlessly frustrates Sirius' mum and Kreacher, who cannot understand him.

"Make your wife stop speaking to the boys in that heathen language!" she demanded of Sirius.

"English and Norwegian are both Germanic languages," Astrid informed her, and then Sirius left, because he read the anger cues on his mother's face and didn't want to be there for the outburst.

He opens his mouth, but forgets what he was about to say because suddenly he sees something at the window-

“Fucking hells, what’s-”

Voldemort turns to look, and says, “that’s Nagini,” just as Sirius realises it’s a huge snake’s head. “You’ve met her before.”

Threw it into a wall, more like.

“Don’t mind her. She has a curious nature.” Voldemort waves his hand, and the curtains draw close, covering that unnerving yellow stare.

“It’s *huge*! What is it, exactly?”

“She is a Maledictus.”

Sirius blinks. Truly, only Voldemort can stumble upon such creatures.

“A Maledictus? Really?” He looks back to the window, though now he can only see the curtains. “That’s a *woman*?”

“Not anymore. Not for decades.”

“How on earth did you find it-”

“*Her.*”

“How did you find her?”

Maledictus are such rare…people? Specimens?

“She found me, actually. She was eager for company. Even if her human self is long gone, and she forgot almost entirely what it means to live as one, she still retains a far greater intellect than your usual snake. And she’s much more resilient, of course. She could handle possession, unlike the others that shrivelled and died. She was unaffected; grateful, even.”

Sirius doesn’t want to think of him having to possess snakes, in a dark and lonely forest, lost and-

“Her memories are muddy, unclear, yet she remembers Grindelwald. She thoroughly disliked him.” Voldemort seems very satisfied with this. “We have no idea how she met him, however.”

What an extraordinary and curious life. Yet another special creature that gravitates towards Voldemort.

“So, you’ll keep her?”

“Yes. We’ve developed quite the bond through the years.” He looks at Sirius. “At least I know *she* will never betray me. She can hardly communicate with anyone else, you see.”

Great. Now Sirius is jealous of a cursed woman turned snake. “She can’t turn back into a human?” he checks.

Voldemort smiles, and Sirius wonders if his jealousy is so evident.

“In theory, she cannot. The blood-malediction curse is one of the strongest in existence. I offered to look into it, but she refused. Apparently, she’s happier as a snake. The few memories she retains from her human past are unpleasant, to say the least. They used to lock her in a circus in Paris. Hardly surprising she wants nothing to do with people.”

“You are people,” Sirius reminds him.

Another smile. “I am unlike any other.”

Sirius can hardly argue with that.

Voldemort asks him more about his sons, and it’s the easiest topic, the safest; Sirius makes sure to include Harry, always, in the ‘my boys’ category; he also makes sure not to mention Astrid, not even vaguely. Even when he wants to explain Marvolo takes the most after her, he changes it to ‘Marvolo takes after his grandfather, Thor’ instead. Voldemort’s jaw twitches, anyway.

It makes him feel guilty he has so much to tell, while Voldemort doesn’t.

Sirius lived an entire life, seems like, and all this time, Voldemort was just- surviving, clinging on by a thread. He warms a tad towards Nagini, because at least he had her, though he’s not sure when he got her, and he won’t ask. He can’t ask *‘and how long were you completely alone in that forest before you met her?’*.

A dying voice in his head keeps trying to remind him that it was Voldemort’s fault for how he ended up, but it’s so hard to listen to it, not with Voldemort there, alive and talking to Sirius; it’s hard to listen to it, when Sirius decided to focus on the fact that without Voldemort doing what he did, he wouldn’t have his sons.

He can’t think that without Voldemort he’d have James, he wouldn’t have went to Azkaban, that Rabastan and his little family would have been happy. It would be too painful, too conflicting- so when he decided to bring him back, Sirius also decided it’s far better to focus on the fact that what makes him happiest in life, his sons, only exist *directly* because Voldemort’s actions that Samhain night. Even Harry- Sirius has him, the way he does, they share the bond they have because of that.

If Voldemort listened to Sirius that night, if the Potters survived, Sirius would have lost them soon, anyway. When Voldemort won, and the rumours and quite frankly common knowledge there was something between him and Voldemort became more public, James would have never spoken to him again; Lily wouldn’t have allowed Sirius anywhere near Harry. He’d have lost Harry, and Sirius cannot imagine now a life where Harry isn’t his kid, where Harry

doesn't send him hilarious letters every week, or grins at Sirius every morning when he's home.

He loved James; he remembers loving James so *deeply*; but he adores Harry. Having Harry, watching him grow up, has been a blessing.

So Sirius keeps this in mind, whenever a spark of anger, of pain, tries to take hold; whenever he looks at Voldemort and that voice whispers 'he killed James', tries to play a memory for him, of James' crumpled body by the stairs, Sirius thinks of Harry, and his sons, and it goes away.

(-)

"Did you enjoy my gift?" Voldemort asks, when they're back in the living room. "Robards," he clarifies.

The Auror nailed to that structure like that muggle god; Azkaban collapsed. The entire island set ablaze.

"Yes." Of course Sirius enjoyed it.

He enjoys it far more now, that he has confirmation it was a gift for him.

The gramophone whirls, softly, before it starts playing. Sirius hears the beginning notes of Sinatra's 'My way', one of Voldemort's favourites.

Of course he'd pick that song to play first. Everything has to be his way, all the time.

"I hear the fire is still raging."

Voldemort smirks, satisfied. "Not even Dumbledore could put an end to it."

Actually, Dumbledore didn't *want* to end the curse, Sirius almost says, but decides against it. Voldemort looks very pleased with himself, no point in ruining it.

"Where are the Dementors, then?"

Voldemort lifts an eyebrow. "No talk of war, didn't we agree?"

No, we didn't. Voldemort said it, last they saw each other, that there would be no more 'business', but Sirius certainly didn't agree.

Eventually, he will have to remind Voldemort the war and state of the country won't be something Sirius can be pushed out of.

But not now.

“I got an owl,” Voldemort says. “To write you letters, since you said you wanted them.”

Sirius hadn’t said that, either. He said Voldemort could have wrote him a letter, if he wasn’t keen on using the Mark to summon Sirius, instead of flat out ignoring him.

“Alas, Nagini ate it.”

Sirius snorts. “I heard she ate a muggle, too.”

Voldemort shrugs. “She has a healthy appetite. Perhaps you can write to me, when you want to see me.”

How convenient. “What if Nagini eats my owl? I’ll have you know, the Blacks only use the most expensive, rare breeds. Wouldn’t do to lose one.”

“What a pity that would be,” Voldemort agrees, turning his glass between his long fingers. “Then, I suppose, to save the poor owls, you may just visit whenever you wish, without any notice.”

Sirius lights another cigarette. He lifts an eyebrow, exhaling the smoke. “What if she eats me?”

Voldemort laughs. “I’d greatly worry for the state of a wizard’s or witch’s education if a snake can harm them. One that isn’t a Basilisk, of course.”

Sirius wants Voldemort to be the one to initiate their meetings. He *needs* Voldemort to be the one to do so.

However, it seems Voldemort wants the opposite.

“We can just establish a date now, for our next dinner,” Sirius suggests. “Or lunch. Or whatever.”

It’s subtle, the way Voldemort’s careless facade morphs into rapt attention: a refocused tilt of his shoulders, a new glint in his eyes.

Sirius holds his breath.

“Perhaps breakfast.” Voldemort’s voice comes out low, touches Sirius like a physical caress.

It makes him shiver.

Oh, he’s good. Muscles twitch in Sirius’ lower abdomen.

“When?” he asks.

The focus in those brown-red eyes increases. *Are they browner?* Sirius wonders, caught off guard, almost disorientated. Were they always like this, or is it truly because of his experiences with Ring Tom that his perception has now changed?

“Tomorrow,” Voldemort goes on, with that smooth voice. “And, to ensure you make it in time, why not spend the night here?”

The twitch in his abdomen becomes a spasm. No, scratch that, it becomes an abyss. An *inferno*.

Briefly, doubt slices through it. *Does he really want sex?* Sirius wonders, what he wondered ever since he wrote in the diary. *Did he ever want it?* The feelings the thought brings are unbearable: guilt, nausea, pain.

But no. Those thoughts were there to torment him when he was alone, waiting for Barty to bring Voldemort back.

When Voldemort was back, but he wouldn’t see Sirius, wouldn’t reach out to him.

Sirius saw Tom, thought of Tom, of that tragically twisted, hurt boy, trapped in a diary, trapped in an orphanage, in Hogwarts, in a nightmare. Trapped, and lost, all at once, eternally.

But Voldemort is here, right across from Sirius, staring at him with those intelligent, bright eyes. His gaze dispels Sirius’ worries.

This is not a boy. He’s been that boy, and the essence of him will always linger, but the boy grew into a man of god-like power and intellect. If he didn’t want to have sex with Sirius, he wouldn’t have done it.

He wanted it.

Sirius tormented himself thinking about that first night, how angry he’d been, how rough, how he slammed Voldemort into the wall- and it was so easy to torment himself with the memory when Voldemort was dead, or vulnerable, barely resurrected, or simply not around.

He still doesn’t like to think about it, but now that he’s been around Voldemort, he’s been touched by his magic again-

It’s *laughable* he ever thought he could slam Voldemort into a wall without Voldemort wanting it.

He remembers a talk they had, so long ago, when Sirius was getting frustrated that Voldemort wouldn’t let Sirius make him come, didn’t understand why it was so important to him.

“It’s important for my ego. I want to make you come for me.”

“To control me through my body. Exactly my point.”

“I already do. I’m fucking you.”

Voldemort smiles. “I’m allowing you to. There’s only the illusion of control.“

He remembers another night, towards the end, he remembers asking for the war to end. And how Voldemort made moves to end it, asked Sirius how he’d like it to end.

How powerful it made him feel, to simply ask for that, and *get* it.

It was always about the illusion of control.

Sirius only realised that when they talked for the last time in the cabin. When he begged Voldemort not to go after Harry.

It's then the illusion shattered. Sirius was *never* in control.

Voldemort does what he wants, and nothing, least of all a twenty-year-old Sirius, could coerce him into anything.

Whenever he didn't want something sexual, he was clear about it, he had no hesitation to make it known, to dissuade Sirius from trying to make him come.

Sirius doesn't even know how on earth he managed that; how he made Sirius stop trying, how it made it seem *normal*, how Sirius accepted it.

"Why won't you let me?" Sirius asks, frustrated, because Voldemort won't let him touch him when they fuck.

"I do not enjoy it," Voldemort answers, clearly.

And Sirius just *accepted* it.

Voldemort was never shy in stating what he wants or doesn't want. It was *Sirius* that was skittish about Voldemort fucking him- and *gods,* he can't believe how stupid he'd been, how insecure and prejudiced, without even realising- but Voldemort persisted; never forceful, always careful, but he persisted until Sirius gave him what he wanted.

It makes him breathe easier to remember it. It takes the guilt away.

Sirius snuffs out his cigarette in the ashtray, gulps down the whiskey, and sets the glass on the table. He stands. "Yes, I suppose that's convenient."

Voldemort smiles again, triumphant.

The thing is, Sirius always liked seeing him win. Even when Sirius was the one losing. There's just something about Voldemort getting what he wants that rubs Sirius in all the right places.

It's part of why he was so pissed with him when he failed. Beyond the betrayal, the pain, the loss-

It was the *disappointment*. And it wasn't just him. The other Death Eaters as well.

Theirs is a brutal world, always has been, with the strongest at the top.

"He was defeated. By a baby," Lucius explained, simply, when Sirius asked why he wasn't going after Voldemort. Why *no one* was going after Voldemort.

And it's why Voldemort hasn't killed them all upon his return. Oh, he's mad at them, Yaxley and Lucius said as much; he's furious, he treats the incarcerated Death Eaters far better than the rest, yet he killed no one because Voldemort *understands*. He might not like it, but he is aware of their reasoning.

Most of them only follow power, and Voldemort lost his power. Who is Voldemort without power? Who is Voldemort if he doesn't win, if doesn't smirk triumphantly, if he doesn't cut through his enemies like butter, if he needs help?

He's *nothing*. Just another wizard. Just a half-blood with no name. Just a ghost haunting a forest, somewhere far away from England.

Voldemort stands, as well.

Gods, how Sirius missed him, in all his glory.

And now it feels right; not that it felt wrong before- the dinner was perfect, everything Voldemort does is perfect, but it was …*different*. Like two pieces of a puzzle that almost fit together, but not quite, not entirely.

This, though? *This* is normal. It's right. The pieces finally slot together, and it's as if they've never been separated in the first place.

Sirius walks to him slowly, but confidently. No more torment, no more hesitation.

He asked Sirius to stay the night, and that was all the permission Sirius needed.

And then he stops, closer than they've been in so long, and this time, Sirius can just reach out and touch him.

So he does.

He lays his hand over Voldemort's chest, his beating heart, alive and steady, and his own lungs shrink at first, breathless, with the sheer shock of it, disbelief he gets to do it again, and them immediately they expand with relief and unadulterated joy.

Apparently, that's all the permission Voldemort needed, because he's the one that closes the small gap between them, and then he kisses Sirius, like he's been holding back all night. Or maybe even longer. That's Sirius' last coherent thought before he dissolves, utterly defenceless against the soft, fluid press of Voldemort's lips.

Voldemort's tongue flickers over his lips and Sirius opens for him without a second's hesitation. He doesn't think. He's nothing but want, pure and grasping want, holding Voldemort close and kissing him more deeply than he maybe ever has.

Voldemort is the flame, he's always been the flame, and Sirius was never afraid to burn. He needed the warmth. All his childhood, raised amongst ice, he sought fire. He wanted to know what it feels like to become ash, to reform and burn again, a thousand times over.

Voldemort showed him. And now he's reminding Sirius what it feels like to be warm again, to defrost.

He grips Voldemort's waist, presses into him, wanting more, wanting everything Voldemort can give.

As was always the case, their kiss is a duel, at least starts that way. More often than not, Sirius didn't give up, wanted to control it, and Voldemort let him.

Yes, he *chose* to let him, Sirius didn't force him, but that doesn't mean Voldemort prefers it that way. Sirius knew back then, too, knew Voldemort so obviously favoured leading their encounters, that while he *'enjoyed the closeness of it'*, when Sirius was in charge, he only did it because Sirius was selfish and immature.

But he grew up. He gives in to Voldemort, gives him the victory that Voldemort could have always gained, anyway.

Next he blinks, they're besides the bed, and Sirius can't tell if Voldemort Apparated them there, or they kissed all the way from the living room to the bedroom. Hardly matters.

If he was in control, he'd rip Voldemort's robe off, fast, starving, impatient. But he isn't, and he smiles into another kiss, because-

Yes, Voldemort was always so very patient, wasn't he? Not generally, but in *this*. He was so bloody patient with Sirius. Restrained.

He takes Sirius' robe off slowly, and Sirius matches the rhythm, returns the favour.

He's way past his rebellious phase, so Sirius only has pants under his robes. He wears muggle clothes when he has to meet muggles, mingle with them. They aren't needed with a robe, they were never meant to blend. A robe is all a wizard needs.

But, of course, Voldemort wears a shirt and trousers under his robe. And for him, it's not a rebellious phase, the way it's been for Sirius. There's no thrill of doing something wrong on purpose that Sirius used to have, the glee when he'd let his robe opened, just so his mother could scoff at his muggle attire underneath.

Voldemort takes Sirius in, eyes hungry and roaming, and Sirius takes advantage of this distraction to unbutton Voldemort's shirt.

And when it's off-

Fuck, he's perfect. There's no one in the world like him; certainly not in magical skill and intellect, but even just physically- his other worldly, unique, twisted appeal. Voldemort's beauty is a knife that never loses its sharp edge.

After he experienced him, after he became familiar with every inch of this body, with every scar, every rib pocking out, every tattoo, with the way they fit together- Sirius never wanted someone else in his bed again. Nothing- *no one*- could tempt him anymore.

It's only when he pushed down, tried to lock away the memories of him, put so much effort into attempting not to actively think of Voldemort non-stop that Sirius, with time, managed to want sex with someone else. But it was never the same, was it?

For years, Sirius tried so hard to ignore all he felt, to *stop, stop, stop*. But it was already inside him. It'll never leave him, this aching devastation, this love. He's scarred by it, changed by it.

And now, reborn. Sirius hardened his heart for a decade, and Voldemort brought down those walls in a matter of seconds.

Voldemort is back into Sirius' arms, and everyone else disappears again, become mere shadows, shapeless and uninteresting, diminished by the bright sun that is Voldemort.

Blacks are children of the night, it is said, children of the moon, yet Sirius knows better; Blacks are children of the stars, and the sun is one of the brightest stars, isn't it?

They're on the bed, and Sirius remembers this so well, too, the light weight of Voldemort on top of him, no heavier than a feather, and yet, at the same time, solid and inescapable.

Sirius never wanted to escape. He brings Voldemort closer, into another kiss, and yes-*this*, this is what he wants. To only see, feel, taste, breathe Voldemort, nothing else.

Voldemort touches him, *everywhere*, and gods, what these hands have done to him. *For* him. They've killed, they've dug graves, they ripped Sirius apart, they brought him unimaginable pleasure, wielded impossible magic, but most importantly, they've touched Sirius with a tenderness he once thought confined to songs and the silly novels his mother reads. *Always*, those hands held him like he was something worth touching, keeping, saving.

His touch remains as gentle now, and it's as intoxicating as it was in the past. Gentleness always disarmed Sirius- it's just that he doesn't value it when it comes from gentle people.

Sirius only values it, craves it, from harsh, unloving, hardened people. He wanted gentleness from his mother, and father, and grandfather.

He wants it from Voldemort, who brings devastation and death everywhere he goes, who crushes everything and everyone under his feet, a man feared for his violence-

To have him touch Sirius ever so gently…it is proof of how much he values Sirius, because his inherent nature is cruelty, and yet Sirius is an exception.

And now he's kneeling between Sirius' legs, and those hands of his, pristine and delicate despite all the blood they shed, all the power they hold, they trace Sirius' torso, slowly. His fingers find the scars Sirius didn't use to have, before, the largest and most hideous being the burn he suffered in France, that neither he nor Bella could heal properly, that took months to stop bleeding-

"Wounds caused by magic so dark cannot be healed," Heartwood said, what he likes to say always, a broken record.

He's not even wrong, poor man, but Voldemort is that one exception to every rule, the mage to laugh in the face of magic's inherent limitations.

Magic bends under his will, dances on Sirius' skin, prickles lightly, and just like that, the scar is gone, smooth skin replacing it, and all it took was a little frown of concentration between Voldemort's sculpted eyebrows, a deeper inhale of that deceptively looking chest of his. Not even a wand.

Sirius shivers.

He needs to control himself, fast, because he's already close to orgasm, and they haven't even started. And Voldemort isn't done. He doesn't stop until *all* of Sirius' scars acquired in the past decade are gone.

You can't turn back time, you can't just make me look like before and think you healed the harm you've done, a cruel, tiny part of Sirius wants to tell Voldemort, but it's swiftly silenced by the love that burns so hotly inside him, scourges everything else. Voldemort can do whatever he wants, after all. He can fix everything. Unlike every other power in the world, Voldemort doesn't have limitations- no, for him it was never a question of competency and capability; Voldemort *can* do anything, heal anything, he just needs to want it, first, to understand what, exactly, is wrong.

You just have to let him, the fire inside him whispers. *Trust him, and he'll fix everything.*

Sirius knows that's not so easy- forgiving Voldemort is one thing, already done with, already solved. But *trust*? That is a different thing.

Not relevant now, though. It's difficult to trust Voldemort with his heart-

"I love you," he cries, and Voldemort steps back, walks away, turns around and goes into the night, the last time Sirius will see him alive for a decade, ripping Sirius' heart to pieces.

- but he trusts Voldemort with his body, and his body is singing under his touch.

If his fingers felt heavenly on his skin, there's no word to describe how they feel *inside* Sirius.

His cock throbs, twitches, dangerously close to release. Sirius twists the sheets in his fists, gathers every scrap of self control he still possess, clings to it.

Soon enough, it's not just his cock twitching. It's *all* of him, a tremor that goes through all his muscles; it's only made more intense by watching Voldemort, who, in turn, watches Sirius as if he's the only thing that matters in the world.

And finally, Voldemort settles between Sirius' parted, trembling legs; he hovers above him for the briefest second, places one of his hand on Sirius' cheek, cupping it lightly.

Voldemort stares down as if in disbelief. Sirius, too, is still in disbelief that this is actually happening, that they're together again in this bed, in this home that was such a comfort, where nothing can hurt them.

And then Voldemort is inside him, and Sirius' mind melts in a puddle of sensations.

He's big; as he presses in, slowly, it paralyses Sirius' lungs. For a handful of moments, that is perfectly fine- Sirius doesn't want anything else inside him that is not Voldemort; not even oxygen.

"Look at me." *Fuck,* Voldemort's voice makes it, somehow, impossibly, a thousand times better.

Sirius hadn't realised he closed his eyes, that he lost a few seconds.

He blinks and finds Voldemort shaking slightly above him. He's kissing Sirius' nose, his temple, his cheek.

Sirius reaches up and captures his lips.

When they part and Voldemort looks at to him, something in those brown-red eyes seems to shatter.

Sirius winds his legs around Voldemort's hips, dragging him even closer, pushing him deeper inside Sirius.

I'll never let him go again.

Voldemort starts moving, nose buried in Sirius' neck now, inhaling deeply, kissing that place that is not quite neck, not quite shoulder; every inch of skin Voldemort is in contact with is suddenly highly erogenous, sharp, urgent, overwhelming pleasure blossoming everywhere.

The air feels searing hot, burning Sirius' lungs, making his blood boil.

Fucking Voldemort always felt like fucking magic, itself, more powerful than any ritual, more dangerous, and far, far more pleasurable.

Sirius comes fast, untouched, his cock throbbing between their bodies, and Voldemort follows him immediately after.

Once the ringing in his ears subsides, Sirius hears Dio's voice, drifting in from the gramophone in the living room.

'When the strong young man of the rising sun

Heard the tolling of the great black bell'

Voldemort collapses on top of him, breathes erratically against his skin, and Sirius winds his arms around him.

“Do you remember when I used to play ‘Temple of the king’ for you?” he asks.

“I remember.” Voldemort’s whisper sets his hyper sensitive skin alight again.

‘When the bell began to ring

Meant the time had come for one to go

To the temple of the king’

“What do you think it means?” Sirius asks Voldemort, after finishing the song, his fingers resting on the strings of his guitar, caressing them softly.

Sometimes, Sirius can’t quite gauge the meaning of muggle songs, or what the writer intended for it to mean.

Voldemort always seems to know, even when hearing songs for the first time, as Sirius introduces him to them.

“It’s about death,” Voldemort answers, which baffles Sirius.

“How so? How could going to the temple of the king mean death?”

A soft laugh. “The king is Jesus. God.”

“But that’s a god,” Sirius argues. “Not a king.”

“He is the king of kings. And the ringing of the black bell- muggles often ring bells when someone dies.”

“You were wrong about what it means,” Sirius says, his hands wandering all over Voldemort’s back. “It’s about answering a calling, about finding your purpose in life.”

He can feel Voldemort’s lips stretch into a smile over Sirius’ neck. “I see the years haven’t made you wiser.”

‘Then all could see by the shine in his eyes

The answer had been found

Back with the people in the circle he stands

Giving, feeling

With just one touch of a strong right hand, they know

Of the temple and the king'

Voldemort is the King, he decides. And Sirius is the strong young man that went to him and found the answer.

Sirius turns them around, on their sides, lowers his head until he can press his ear against Voldemort's chest, hear the reassuring rhythm.

There's no music on earth that can match the joy it evokes in Sirius to hear it. There is no treasure in any vault more valuable than the dip of Voldemort's waist beneath Sirius' bent arm, the way their legs are intertwined. His body fits into Sirius' like they were made as a set.

They were; Sirius is sure of this now. That magic wanted them to fit together, but it fucked up at the last moment, separated them by time.

I'm sorry, Sirius wants to say. *I'm sorry I was born so late. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you since the beginning, when you needed me the most.*

More painful than that fit of fancy, Sirius wants to say he's sorry for abandoning him in Albania; that was something Sirius could control, unlike the timing of his birth.

So he says it. "I'm sorry," whispered against Voldemort's chest, straight over his heart. It's so easy to say it, even if Sirius' tongue almost trips around the unfamiliar word. It feels perverse, as if he's a child caught saying a forbidden swear word, and yet- it still came out so easily.

He doesn't expect Voldemort to respond; he was always…*softer* when they were in bed, cuddled into each other. But Sirius feels better for saying it, and he rests his forehead more comfortably against Voldemort's shoulder.

It's no surprise sleep comes easily to him now, even if it evaded him for a decade. He's relaxed, and happy, and there are no thoughts to haunt him. He's drifting off, peacefully, when Voldemort speaks.

"I missed this." Sirius startles back to full awareness. "I missed *you*."

The words sound dragged out by force, hesitant, unsure.

Sirius grins, even happier than he'd been a few minutes before. His heart soars. He looks up, meets Voldemort's gaze- there's some panic there, that was present in his voice as well, and it's so *endearing*.

Did he ever say that to another human being? No, Sirius is sure he hadn't.

He rests his forehead against Voldemort's shoulder again. "I love you," he says.

He doesn’t want *that* night to be the only time Sirius said it. He wants to get rid of the memory of Voldemort fleeing from it; Sirius remembers his face so well, that horrified expression, the same *panic* in his eyes that he just saw now when Voldemort forced himself to utter the word ‘miss’.

Of course, Voldemort goes stiff in his arms, Sirius can feel the man’s fight of fight instincts kicking in.

Gods, I made the dark lord flee, Sirius thinks. This man that always stands and fights, and Sirius made him run away with just three words.

This time he won’t run- he might try, but Sirius *won’t* let him. He tightens his arms around him, possessive.

“Goodnight,” Sirius says, places a quick kiss on his skin, to let him know he certainly isn’t expecting Voldemort to say anything in return.

He doesn’t need Voldemort saying he loves Sirius. He will never say it. But that ‘I missed you’ was more than enough.

“*I saw his every thought, I absorbed every feeling you awoke inside him. His trust in you was unwavering. He didn’t doubt you for a second, when he decided to give me away, when he took me off and transferred me to you. He* ***loved*** *you,”* Tom said, furious and scared, glaring at Sirius, made of dark magic, fear and…a piece of Voldemort.

Slowly, Voldemort relaxes, starts breathing again, and his fingers curl around the back of Sirius’ neck.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone hasn't heard Dio's 'the temple of the king', I highly recommend it. I'm happy the boys are back together so I can sneak some more music here and there.

This chapter is shorter than usual because I wanted the 'dinner' to stand on its own, after testing how it would go with the rest. That means the next chapter should be ready faster than usual, hopefully a week or two at most.

As always, thank you for reading, and I'd love to hear your thoughts, if you have the time to share them! I hope you enjoyed it! ❤️

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"She hates me," Sirius laments when he tries to reach out to Nagini, only for her to uncoil, raise herself, fangs glistening.

"You threw her into a wall," Voldemort reminds him.

Sirius lies back on the couch, and Nagini hisses at him one last time before she curls closer to the fireplace.

"What would you do if you woke up with a snake looming above you? I was startled, is all!"

"I'd ask what it wants."

"Haha, hilarious. Did you carry me that night? Up the stairs, bridal style?" Sirius teases.

Voldemort certainly made sure Sirius ended up on the couch in Grimmauld the night he got his body back; he didn't leave Sirius in the cellar, on the floor.

Voldemort rolls his eyes. "You did faint like a damsel in distress."

Sirius grins at him. He can't help it. His face hurts from all the smiling he's been doing, and it's not even mid day.

It makes him realise how little he must have smiled in the past decade, that his face muscles are now unaccustomed to the gesture.

"But you weight more than one, so no, I didn't carry you."

"And what did you do after you left me on the couch?"

Voldemort is sitting on his armchair, a cup of tea at his side. Usually, he'd have a book in his hands, but he prefers to watch Sirius now.

"I went to the library."

Merlin, what a nerd. First few minutes back into his body, mad as hell, and he went to look for books. Sirius snorts. "Of course you did. Bet you didn't get far, though."

The library in Grimmauld doesn't just allow anyone to wander inside it. Well, the *interesting* part of it, at least. There's a part that's easily available to everyone, and then there's the side that is only accessible with Sirius' express permission.

"Best not remind me." Voldemort's eyes narrowing slightly. But there's nothing threatening in his gaze.

“Are you sure she can’t understand us?” Sirius asks again, glancing at Nagini.

It’s odd, knowing she was once human, that she still retains some human intellect.

“It seems you don’t make use of your library, either, if you don’t know snakes cannot hear sounds the way we can.”

“I know. Just a bit odd, is all. But I’ll get used to it. Her.”

Voldemort only recently let her inside. Apparently, she was whining about being cold.

The past night they’ve been busy doing things that Sirius *definitely* wouldn’t do around Nagini. She might not hear properly, but she *sees* enough, and neither wanted an audience when they fucked in the bedroom.

And then, in the bathroom.

But as Voldemort was cooking breakfast, he opened the window, and Nagini started hissing until she was allowed to crawl inside.

“Maybe she’ll like me better as Padfoot,” Sirius ponders.

“Doubtful. She’ll probably like you even less as a dog. She killed a couple of dogs, last summer. I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Now *I* don’t like her!” Sirius narrows his eyes at her. “Bad snake! Leave poor dogs alone!”

Voldemort laughs.

“What?”

“Bella was upset about the dogs as well. Not about the muggle Nagini ate, though.”

Sirius shrugs. He won’t deny he’s generally fonder of dogs than of people, muggle or otherwise.

“Bella was upset the snake didn’t eat Barty. She said the idiot sniffed her clothes-”

“Don’t remind me. For weeks, it was as if I was back in the orphanage, with children fighting each other, complaining about food, and clothes and lack of entertainment.”

“Tell me,” Sirius asks. He wants to hear *everything*.

“I am sure Bella already-”

“I want to hear it from you.”

Voldemort graces him with a smile, and then he starts talking, and Sirius could listen to him forever.

However, unlike in the past, Sirius can’t stay in the cabin indefinitely.

He's still ignoring it, the knowledge he'll have to leave, and the way Voldemort will react to it.

They still have time, though. His family thinks he's on a business trip in Paris for a handful of days.

Granted, Sirius will have to go to Paris, before he returns home, to buy Astrid a perfume he always gets her when he's in France, and to get sweets for the children. It would be suspicious if he returned empty-handed.

But that's for tomorrow. For now, he pushes everything to the back of his mind, and focuses on Voldemort.

Not that it's hard. It's so easy; frighteningly easy. But it was always like that; Voldemort always made the world disappear, surrounded Sirius in a bubble where nothing else exists.

At lunch, while Voldemort cooks, Sirius tries to befriend Nagini again, offering her eggs. He vaguely recalls snakes eat eggs, though he's unsure where he got that information.

She hisses.

Voldemort laughs.

"What is she saying?"

"You wouldn't like to know."

"I have a new pet, too," Sirius says. "One that would hate you."

"Most animals like me," Voldemort comments, as he pours something into the pan.

"Most animals like *me*." Sirius glares at Nagini. "But there are always exceptions. And Buckbeak would despise you on sight."

"Buckbeak?" Voldemort looks over his shoulder. "You named something *Buckbeak*?"

"I didn't name him!" Sirius defends himself. "He was already used to the name, so I didn't change it-"

Voldemort turns to stare at him fully. "Buck…beak- let me guess. A hippogriff."

Sirius cringes. But it's not like he expected Hagrid would be creative or subtle. He named his poor dog Fang, after all.

"Yeah."

"Where did you get one? They've been prohibited to own for decades. Not that it would stop you, but-"

"I stole him."

Voldemort blinks. “You stole a hippogriff.”

“I suppose *someone*’s stealing habits rubbed off on me,” Sirius teases, remembering how Voldemort used to steal impulsively.

When Sirius tells him the story, genuine mirth shines into Voldemort’s eyes.

“Of course, now I am living with a sword dangling over my head, waiting for Lucius to figure out it’s the same Hippogriff he waged war against.”

“I wouldn’t worry; I keep him occupied these days. How is his son like? Apparently not very bright, insulting a hippogriff-”

“Draco is smart,” Sirius interrupts him. “He’s just incredibly spoiled, unused to consequences. Buckbeak is probably the first being he encountered that didn’t give a shit about who his father is. But he learned his lesson.”

“Does he take after Lucius?”

“Gods, no! Well, he looks like Lucius, but he’s more of a Black than a Malfoy in personality. He reminds me of Regulus, often. No wonder they get along so well.”

“Lucius never mentions him.”

Lucius will probably never utter Draco’s name anywhere near Voldemort. Most Death Eaters would never bring Voldemort’s attention onto their families.

Yaxley went as far as to send his oldest outside of the country.

Sirius understands, he does, because the Voldemort they know it’s not the Voldemort Sirius knows. Or rather, Voldemort is the same, but he would only see the others’ families as either irrelevant, or to be used as potential blackmail.

Sirius doesn’t harbour any concern about his own family; it’s not just the conviction he has that Voldemort wouldn’t want to hurt them, but it’s the knowledge, deep inside Sirius, indomitable and persistent, that he *can* protect his family from anything, if need be. There’s no force, no entity that can harm his family- not while he still draws breath, not for as long as there are stars in the universe.

“You know how tight-lipped Lucius is about what is closest to his heart. To this day, I still don’t know how much gold he has. Narcissa claims she tried to ask him once when he was drunk and half asleep, in bed, and he still didn’t confess,” Sirius jokes.

“Are your sons close to Draco?” Voldemort returned to his pan, his back to Sirius, so he can’t see when Sirius throws an egg at Nagini’s face.

She doesn’t rat him out, just gives him an unnervingly intelligent glare that promises retribution. Sirius winks at her. *Bring it on.*

“Yes. Draco and Harry are practically glued together. They used to order Orion around, when they were younger, and he was trying to please them, but now there’s a more competitive nature between Draco and Orion- it’s normal between heirs of old families. Marvolo- depends; they either ignore him, or they let him trail around after them. But they are cousins- regardless if they fight, gods forbid another kid interferes between them. They’re a pack of bullies, no one else can stand them when they’re together, besides the twins or Blaise; Blaise is Bianca’s son. Bianca is-”

“I know of her. The black widow.”

Of course he must have heard of her.

Once, when they were all a tad drunk and Parkinson asked who is the most lethal person they know -*‘present company excluded,’ he smirks, nodding at Sirius*- Nott said it’s Rodolphus, Avery insisted it must be Dolohov, and Lucius quipped it was Bianca. Funnily enough, just a couple of days later, her ninth husband died.

“Which boy is your favourite?”

Sirius laughs. “Depends on the day, really.”

“Today, then,” Voldemort drawls.

“Well, Helix can’t talk back to me properly, so he’s easier to deal with.”

“That's why Bella is your favourite cousin, because she doesn’t talk back.” Voldemort’s tone drips with sarcasm.

“Hey, it’s different with kids!”

“Hmm.”

Sirius wonders, with a bit of guilt, if Helix slept well. If perhaps he had a nightmare.

He’s fine, stop it.

Grandmother Irma says they are all spoiling Helix too much, that he’ll grow up sheltered and ‘weak’ if they keep it up, but everyone pretty much ignores everything she has to say on any topic. Besides, Sirius caught her spoiling Helix, as well, so really, who is she to talk?

Thinking of that ancient relic, Sirius remembers she used to tell Orion he’s the man of the house when Sirius was away from Grimmauld, which put pressure on the boy. Once, she even said that to Orion when Regulus was home. Regulus hasn’t talked to her since that day, and it’s been almost two years.

He wonders if she’s telling Marvolo the same nonsense now.

Merlin, you’re being silly. They’re all fine.

It's not like Sirius hasn't travelled before, even for a couple of weeks, away from his family. Yet he never felt guilty. Even when he was spending time with Felix.

But, of course, this is different than having an affair that was going nowhere, isn't it? Sirius knew his time with Felix wouldn't affect his family in any way.

Voldemort, however...

He's not a man Sirius can only call upon every other month or so, spend a weekend with in Germany and then return home to Grimmauld as if nothing happened.

Well, Father had full blown relationships with other women, some lasted years, and nothing happened.

Nothing beside a terribly tense situation back at Grimmauld, Sirius and Regulus suffering because of his absence, and his mother punishing Sirius because he was a stand in for his father-

Stop thinking about it!

He does manage to let the thoughts go, once lunch is ready and Voldemort sits beside him at the table. No sense in worrying about it now, after all. He'll deal with it when he has to deal with it.

(-)

As soon as Sirius Apparates away from the cabin and straight into the werewolf camp- though it's more like a village by now, with cabins and even a small bar- Greyback, seated by the great bonfire, takes a good, long *whiff*, and shakes his head.

"Couldn't help yourself, could you?" he asks Sirius, with a snort. "You got a death wish, dog."

"Shut it," Sirius advises, siting beside him. "And I'm not the one with the death wish." He glares at the werewolf. "Did you actually tell him you s-" *No, pick another word. 'Serve' won't do*. "That you're on my side?"

Greyback's moon-silver eyes pin him down. "I spoke the truth. We had a pact. You fulfilled your end of it." He gestures around the village. "My pack is safe, well fed, and you provide assistance whenever we need it. You even helped me discipline some of the wizards and witches here in matters of magical combat. And, in return, I help you defeat your foes." He peers even harder at Sirius. "We hunted together several times. Yes, dog, I am on your side."

The last bit counts more than the rest, Sirius suspects. He tried reminding Greyback, from time to time, that Lucius and the others also provided the pack with the land, but the werewolf wrinkles his nose in distaste when Sirius mentions it.

Sirius did hunt with them, once or twice a year. He drank with Greyback, stayed behind for a talk, every now and again, after resolving some issues.

When the kids of the pack see him, they yell in delight and call him 'Padfoot'.

Lucius and the others never stepped foot inside the village.

"I appreciate it," Sirius says, slowly. "I do. But Voldemort and I are on the same side."

Greyback searches Sirius' face for another moment, before he nods. "Very well, then."

"He's proud, you know he's proud-"

A snort.

"So best you never mention - just tell him you're under his command. It will make all our lives easier, yeah?"

"Easier?" Greyback looks away, into the distance. "No, Black, I don't think 'easier' is the word I'd choose."

"Oh, stop it!" Sirius snaps. "You were delighted to follow him and go to war before-"

"Delighted? No. Agreeable? Yes. For this." He gestures at the cabins, at the children playing the the distance. "He promised me a place where my pack can thrive in safety. I *already* have it."

Sirius opens his mouth-

"No matter," Greyback cuts over him. "I gave you my word I will do whatever you wish. And this is your wish, so I shall follow it."

"Good, then," Sirius says. "Besides, if you'd refuse him, he'd decimate the pack."

Another snort. He turns his head to look at Sirius again. "I do fear him. A predator must always recognise the bigger predator lying in wait. But you see, dog, you're mightier than he is."

Sirius blinks. "Are you drunk this early in the day?"

"I'm a werewolf, you idiot. My entire being is governed by the moon. I am attuned to it, and the night is my home. I am a vessel for the moon's mighty magic. Do you really think I don't feel how it responds to you, dog? Do you think that I didn't notice how it shines upon you when you hunt with us?"

"Oh."

"My grandfather told me, long ago, very long ago," Greyback says, gaze now lost into the past, "hundreds of year ago, that his own grandfather bit a Black, once. And his grandfather

died, on the spot, turned to ash. Yet the Black lived, and didn't turn on the next full moon, nor any that came after-"

"How old are you, exactly?"

"*Old*," Greyback cuts him off. "Old enough to know things others forgot. Old enough to know never to bite a Black."

Sirius never thought of it, never heard about a Black being bitten by a werewolf, but now that he thinks of it, it might be their astral magic, even when latent, protects them from this specific curse.

"We're drawn to your blood," Greyback goes on. "Werewolves enjoy your company, like your pathetic tame one, that Lupin boy that trailed after you. You see how the pups, specifically seek you out-"

"I thought it was because I turn into a dog."

"How about that girl of yours, that Dora? She turns into a dog, too? Nah, I don't think she does, yet all feel drawn to her, too."

"Too much, really," Sirius says."Is Hati still-"

"No. I forbade it. I told you he won't dare approach her again, lest I skin him alive." Greyback sighs. "That boy…Youngest sons are always difficult. I hear he's seeing a *man* now, a wizard." Another sigh. "I spoiled him too much, you know? I shouldn't have had him so late in life. I'm too old for it, I've grown too soft. And look at how he disgraces me."

"Youngest are the best," Sirius argues, because his sweet little Helix could do no wrong. Ever.

Greyback laughs. "Only until they start talking and walking and rebelling. We'll speak again in twenty years, see if you change your mind."

(-)

When he returns home, after a brief trip to Paris, everything is in order. Helix is happy, Marvolo is as weird as always, his mother and grandma Irma still hate each other and Astrid.

Astrid remains the only sane person in the family, unbothered by anything.

But for how long? Sirius wonders, as he hands out the gifts to his wife and children and sits down for dinner. *How long will she remain unbothered? How far can I push?*

He avoids meeting her eyes. He doesn't like feeling guilty. He doesn't like that she will be the hardest to deal with in what's coming.

His mother won't pose any issues, he doesn't care what his grandmother will have to say, the kids can be easily appeased, but Astrid…

And Harry. He won't take this lightly, either.

But even Harry will be easier to handle.

What is perhaps most uncomfortable is the knowledge that, in the end, Astrid will just have to shut up and look the other way. But she will hate him, surely. And Sirius always had her on his side, all these years, had her full support, in anything, no matter how strange some of his choices and decisions must have seemed to her.

Sirius loves her, would die for her, she's the mother of his children, she's a Black, he made her a Black and she stepped into the role perfectly, elegantly, full of grace. She made his life so much easier in the past decade, she was the only person that Sirius knew will not criticise him, will not question him, will welcome his presence whenever he needed her. And he's about to completely destroy all of it.

He already did.

His mother watches him carefully, seated on Sirius' right, as she always was. Usually the seat reserved for a wife, for the lady of the house. But that was her seat, and Sirius wanted her to have it. She offered to give it up as soon as he married, she offered her bedroom to Astrid, too, but Sirius didn't allow that either.

He can't think of any other woman that would have put up with that from him. But Astrid never even mentioned it, sat at Sirius' left, without a single glare aimed at him or his mother.

As soon as he puts Helix to bed and goes to his own room, Sirius wants out of Grimmauld. Wants to go back to Voldemort.

He shouldn't; he decided he'll play it carefully, that he will think it all through, buy himself as much time as possible before the truth comes out, that he'll wait until his kids are older, at least Orion, old enough to understand. But that was foolish of him. Now that he got to experience staying with Voldemort in that cabin again…he just wants back.

Now that he had that again, he's reminded why he avoided Grimmauld so much in his youth. Because it's suffocating.

A prison.

A prison he loves, *deeply*, but a place where he can never be without burdens.

And things with Astrid are still good, but he knows eventually they won't be, that he'll live with someone that hates him; that he'll have to see disdain and judgement in her eyes. He can already imagine the tense silences between them, or the passive aggressive comments.

And the boys….they'll just have to sit there and watch it all happen.

You could avoid all that by doing the right thing and choosing not to put your family through this. The thought is so foreign, so brief, it's easy to dismiss.

He won't give up Voldemort. He can't. Voldemort is his. He gave everything else to the Blacks, to Grimmauld, to a legacy he didn't ask to inherit but was thrust upon him since he was born. He won't give up Voldemort. Not now that he has him again. He just can't.

So he Apparates back to the cabin, less than twelve hours after he left it.

At least he's pleased, the smug bastard, Sirius thinks, when Voldemort's eyes shine with triumph, as soon as Sirius steps inside. He wasn't so pleased when Sirius left, in the morning, there was a small tick in his jaw when Sirius woke up bright and early and said he had to go. That, too, made Sirius feel guilty.

But now Voldemort is content and Sirius calms down.

Inside the cabin, there are no complications. No past obstacles, no current ones, no future headaches.

There's just Voldemort.

(-)

In late April, Sirius is besieged by an army of owls again, reminding him of the time when Buckbeak struck Draco.

"If I'd have known he was a werewolf, I'd have liked him better," Orion's letter says. *"But, by the gods, how could one have guessed? He's so tame! Dora said werewolves are exciting, that Hati is an absolute beast of power, and that Greyback is as tall as a mountain with a glare that strikes fear into the bravest of men. Lupin is nothing like that!"*

Harry's letter is far longer, asking Sirius to speak to Dumbledore so Remus can keep his job. Asking Sirius to speak to Dumbledore to fire Snape, who was the one that let it slip to the students at breakfast that Remus is a werewolf.

Regina's letter demands that Sirius fires Dumbledore. *"I had to share a castle with an animal! How dare they!?"* Sirius is unsure how Regina thinks Sirius has the power to fire Dumbledore, but Regina always seemed to think Sirius can do anything. Once, when she was very young and wanted to go for a swim, but was stuck inside due to terrible weather, she turned to Sirius and asked him to *'make it stop raining, and fetch me an ocean!'*.

Sirius only writes back to Harry, telling him there's no saving Remus' job, that the Defence against the Dark Arts post is cursed, anyhow, and no one person can hold it longer than a year.

There is an emergency Governers meeting the following day, where eleven of them demand Dumbledore explain himself, provide reasoning as to how he thought it was acceptable to hire a werewolf and let him loose in a school filled with children.

Dumbledore smiles politely, in that disinterested way of his, as the Governors yell at him.

“Gods, you’re all scared of a werewolf,” Sirius snaps at the others. “Nothing happened, everyone was safe, and now he’s gone. Can we get on with our day? I’ve better things to do than this!”

Like having lunch with Voldemort. Sirius checks his watch. Food should be ready, waiting for him. He doesn’t want to be late.

He already missed dinner and lunch the previous day, because he has to spend some time in Grimmauld too, and Voldemort is already in a mood about that.

Lucius glares at Dumbledore. “You’re growing more senile by the day, Dumbledore! A couple of years ago you managed to hire the Dark Lord, last year you hired a con artist, and this year a werewolf? What should we expect for the next one? A vampire?”

“Oh, nothing as exciting,” Dumbledore says. “Only a former Auror. Alastor Moody agreed to come out of his well-deserved retirement and dedicate his time to teaching students how to defend themselves. Surely, you wouldn’t find any fault in that choice.”

Lucius’ entire left side of the face twitches.

“Mad-Eye?” someone else asks. “Are you *insane*? Rumour is he’s so paranoid he blew up a gift because he thought it was an assassination attempt! He’ll end up cursing a poor eleven-year-old that startles him in the hallways! Are you actively trying to get our children murdered, Dumbledore?”

(-)

“They’re not wrong,” Voldemort says over lunch, as Sirius explains why he was late. “But I do not see why they are surprised; Dumbledore’s reckless way of ruling Hogwarts is well documented, after all. Hogwarts used to be the best school in Europe, before Dumbledore took over and turned it into a joke.”

Sirius sighs. “We have the tournament next year…Moody will scare the shit out of the French, and he’ll look for illegal Dark Arts books under the robes of every Durmstrang student. And,” he says, eyes narrowed, “Hogwarts is no joke! How can you say that!? A half-giant is the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, for Merlin’s sake! Now, *that* is a joke! And an ancient, corrupt, former politician leads Durmstrang, one that allowed wanted criminals to hide in his school!”

Voldemort smiles, and Sirius forgives him for insulting Hogwarts. “I heard you had Karkaroff murdered.”

“I was possessed!” Sirius insists, but he feels his lips turn up.

He can’t help it. If Voldemort smiles at him, it’s impossible not to smile back.

“You spared me the trouble of doing it myself. As for the tournament, you should demand an independent curse breaker check the Goblet and charm it against outside influence,” Voldemort suggests.

Sirius complained a lot in the past days about all the formalities he had to watch over, as the three countries prepare for the Tournament.

“Durmstrang students are especially competitive, and not afraid to cheat. There have been cases in the past where the Goblet of Fire has been tampered with.”

“Lucius just suggested we bring a curse breaker from Italy last week, in a Wizengamot session-”

“That’s because I suggested it to him,” Voldemort says, slightly annoyed. “I hear Dumbledore demanded an age limit this time, so only seventeen-year-olds and above may compete.”

“He did.”

“If I were a student, I’d know how to get around it, trick the Goblet.”

Sirius laughs. “There are no underage students like you roaming around Hogwarts, so I am not too worried about it.”

“If you were at Hogwarts right now, underage, and the tournament was happening, wouldn’t you be tempted into bypassing the enchantments?”

“Fuck, yes!” Sirius grins. “And I’d win the whole thing!”

Voldemort’s eyes soften. “I have no doubt about that.”

They talk about past Tournament challenges for the rest of the meal, and how they’d have solved them.

Voldemort thinks the competition has gotten easier and easier through the centuries, scoffs at a ‘measly dragon’ being the first task, and *‘merepeople? really? what wizard worth his salt would have an issue navigating a lake?’* then goes into a tirade about the terrible state of education these days.

Sirius loves watching him worked up, show passion about something, and that only usually ever happens when talking about magic.

When Sirius returns to Grimmauld, his mother ambushes him, screaming her head off about Remus, demands to know how long Sirius had known he was a werewolf.

When Sirius tells her Remus had been a werewolf since childhood, his mother goes pale, then red, and she orders Kreacher to bring her purse.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to give Dumbledore a piece of my mind,” she spits. “He put my son- *my son and heir*- into a bedroom with a werewolf!”

“Oh, dear gods! I’m fine!”

“You could have been bitten! Oh, if Orion knew-”

“He knew,” Sirius says. “I told him, before he died.”

He wanted his dad to know he was an Animagus, he wanted him to see Padfoot, and, of course, that led to having to say why he became one.

And his dad’s eyes softened when faced with Padfoot; he was fiercely proud Sirius managed such a thing, so young. *“If not for the circumstances, you’d be in so much trouble,”* he told Sirius. “*I would lock you in your room until you turned seventeen for daring to attempt something so dangerous. As it is…”* he just smiled and petted Padfoot’s snout.

It was in the last days they had together, and his father was too ill to show up in public, so Dumbledore was saved of his wrath.

Apparently, there’s nothing to save him from his mother’s wrath.

Sirius watches her go, back straight, shoulders high, purse clenched between her fingers, and he pities Dumbledore. The Governors are nothing compared to Walbruga’s Black temper.

For a second, he thinks of sending the old man a letter to warn him to flee or close Hogwarts’ gates.

She barely left the house, when Astrid storms inside the office and demands they send all the children to Durmstrang, that a werewolf allowed to teach at Hogwarts is surely the last straw.

Marvolo sends another letter to Dumbledore, reminding him what laws he broke by hiring a werewolf.

Sirius locks himself in Helix’ bedroom, counting down the hours before nightfall, when he can return to Voldemort.

(-)

Orion would hiss like a cat if anyone wanted to hug him in public. But when they wait for the boys at the Platform, it seems Helix is an exception, because as soon as Orion spots him, he

runs to Sirius and snatches Helix from his arms, spinning him around, to Helix' delight.

Harry snatches him from Orion, next, and they get into an argument about who gets to carry Helix.

"I'm here, too!" Marvolo says. "Didn't you miss me, too?"

"No," Orion says, with a bark like laughter.

"'course I missed you!" Harry ruffles Marvolo's hair. "You're just impossible to carry." Green eyes narrow. "Have you grown again? Sirius, are you feeding him skele-gro potions?!"

Marvolo is almost Harry's height already.

"He has grown," Astrid says, with a sight, and she ends the fight by taking Helix from the boys. "Bought him a new robe last month and he already outgrew it."

"It's hardly my fault!" Marvolo pouts."I didn't do it on purpose! I liked that robe, too!"

"Orion!" Helix yells, from Astrid's arms, leaning over, reaching out for his older brother. "I want Orion!"

"Little traitor!" Marvolo hisses. "Yesterday you only wanted me!"

Orion elbows Harry in the ribs. "Cho!" he whispers, and Harry looks to his left.

Sirius looks, too, to see a pretty girl in a Ravenclaw uniform.

Harry goes red all over, up to the tips of his ears.

Orion snatches Helix from Astrid this time, and dumps him in Harry's arms. "Quick, go and introduce her to your little brother. All girls melt when they see babies!"

"No, I- no, really!"

"Go, go, go!" Orion pushes him.

"Really, Orion!"

"Hey, Chang!" Orion yells, dragging Harry after him, taking advantage Harry can't fight, not with Helix grabbing his glasses.

Sirius smiles, even if the beginning of a headache forms around his temples. He enjoyed the peace, but he's at his most content when all the kids are together, even as noisy as they get.

Astrid tilts her head, looking after them. "Chang…she's a pureblood, yes? I think I met her mother at some point."

"She is." Sirius rolls his eyes.

Astrid's slight frown melts into a smile. "What a pretty girl! Oh, look at sweet Harry, he's smitten! His first crush! Adorable!"

"I like how she styles her hair," Marvolo says. "It's very fashionable."

In the distance, Draco and Ron shake hands as they part, and Lucius smirks, while Arthur Weasley looks as if he sucked on a lemon.

(-)

With all the children home, it's harder to see Voldemort; at least during the day. In the evening, when all the boys are in their rooms, Sirius slips away, spends the night with Voldemort, and then he returns before breakfast is served in Grimmauld.

Voldemort is not exactly thrilled with this arrangement. To placate him, Sirius eats breakfast with him, even earlier than usual, before he goes to eat breakfast with the family, too. Of course, he's no longer hungry by then, and he plays with his food; luckily, no one cares or notices besides his mother.

The worst thing so far has been Helix waking up from a nightmare, going to Sirius' room and crying his lungs out when he found it empty, waking up the entire house.

"Don't let him search for me when you know I'm not home," Sirius snaps at Kreacher.

"But little Master is stubborn, and Kreacher-"

"Take him to Astrid if he wakes up and can't fall back asleep! No, wait-" if he takes Helix to Astrid, then she'll know Sirius is not home either. Granted, she might *already* know that, but so far she hasn't said anything about it. "Take him to Mother."

"Kreacher tried! But little Master-"

"Gods, he's not even four! Have you grown so useless you can't handle a toddler? I should cut off your head and be done with it! Dobby wouldn't fail me like this-"

"Kreacher will handle it!" Kreacher screams at him. "*Dobby,*" he spits. "Useless youngster!"

There's nothing Sirius can do about the holiday in India. He promised the boys the year before that he would take them, and he can hardly back down now.

The week in India feels like one year. Sirius keeps telling himself it's just a week, that he survived without Voldemort for far longer, but it doesn't quite work.

"Are you alright?" Astrid asks him, several times, sensing Sirius' restlessness.

At least he keeps busy, because the kids want to go everywhere, do anything; Orion and Harry bicker often, they both bully Marvolo frequently, and Helix complains about the heat every other hour. He's not hot, Sirius recasts a cooling charm on him often, but it was enough Helix was hot *once*, and now he won't let it go. Feeding him is even more of a hassle than usual, what without Kreacher there to patiently wait an hour for Helix to take a bite. Meanwhile, Orion and Harry won't stop eating, wanting to try every single local food available, and Marvolo developed an obsession with a particular dish and refuses to eat anything else.

Usually, they'd drive Sirius up a wall, and he'd ask Astrid to sort them out, but this time it's a small blessing, because it keeps him busy.

They are supposed to go to Norway next, as they go every summer, but Sirius realises he can't bear to be away from Voldemort for another two weeks, so as soon as they return to Britain he tells Astrid he cannot join them this time.

"What with the war and everything," Sirius says, and she believes him readily. It makes him feel terribly guilty.

She nods. "Yes, Cissa said Lucius can't take time off, either."

Cissa is leaving for Spain with Draco and Harry the next day; that's always the case as well; whenever Sirius and Astrid go to Norway, Cissa and Lucius take Harry with them wherever they're visiting.

His sons all pout and complain about Sirius staying home.

"But everyone cannot wait to see you!" Marvolo points out. "Grandfather especially! He always says he wishes he had a son like you! And Aunt Freya adores you!"

Helix is the worst, starts crying in the hallway, before they're set to leave.

"No, no! I want to stay with Daddy!"

"You'll be fine," Sirius consoles him.

"The monsters will eat me!"

"Your mum is there, so is Thor. No monster gets past them-"

"Nooooo," he wails. "DADDY!"

"You'll sleep with me," Orion says, wrestling Helix out of Sirius' arms.

"The monster would eat you, too!" Helix wails.

Orion rolls his eyes. "Fine, then we'll be together in its stomach."

That only makes Helix cry harder.

It takes another ten minutes to calm Helix down; eventually Astrid distracts him with mentions of the unicorns her brother has. Helix gets so excited, that he forgets all about Sirius, and they finally leave.

The moment they're all gone, Sirius orders Kreacher to pack him a bag.

"Scoundrels," Grandmother Irma sneers at Sirius and his mother, who apparently couldn't wait to get rid of the family, too, so she can go away with Abraxas on one of his private islands.

He realises that's why that *absurd* law passed some years before, with the Ministry gaining power to raid manors- Sirius and Lucius expected the incompetency from Avery and Parkinson, and Regulus was busy with Elara being sick, but they were all shocked Abraxas didn't stop it. *'I was otherwise engaged,'* he drawled, when asked how he could let it happen. Apparently he was *engaged* with Sirius' mother, on a far away island. It makes Sirius wonder how many times his mother had done this whenever Sirius would leave with his wife and kids and he wasn't there to witness it.

"Hold down the fort, Grandma," Sirius snarls at Irma, as he leaves her alone in Grimmauld, with a disgruntled Kreacher and a terrified Dobby.

"If only Orion was here, he'd skin you both alive! Oh, how I miss him! Walburga didn't deserve him!" is the last thing Sirius hears before he disappears.

(-)

For the first three days, Voldemort is in a mood, clearly displeased with Sirius and the holiday to India, even if he doesn't admit to it, claims something else is on his mind; Sirius manages not to compare him to his toddler son, keeps his mouth shut, and by the forth day Voldemort gets over it.

Sirius doesn't want to imagine how the Death Eaters dealt with Voldemort's probably terrible temper when Sirius was abroad.

Not that he should care; Voldemort still insists Sirius shouldn't get involved, doesn't tell him anything about the war efforts, and banned the other Death Eaters from discussing it with Sirius, as well.

To be sure, not much can be going on, seeing how Voldemort is still pretending he's dead, and no bold move was made, outside the Azkaban escape; Fudge is convinced that was all Crouch's fault.

The poor snake is confused by Voldemort's shifting moods, and gods know what Voldemort has been telling her, probably bitched about Sirius, because she really doesn't like him, despite Sirius' best efforts to befriend her.

She still eats the rats he conjures for her; even after all this time, Sirius gets a twisted sort of pleasure when a rat meets a cruel end.

Voldemort scolds him for it, insists Nagini is a hunter, not a house pet, they shouldn't feed her, that she has an entire fauna to decimate around the cabin, but Sirius spotted Voldemort feeding her as well one morning.

Despite Voldemort saying Nagini would like him even less as a dog, when Sirius transforms into Padfoot and joins her for a hunt, she seems tolerant enough.

She spits and hisses at him, no doubt admonishing him for scaring prey she was patiently stalking, but Sirius could swear she actually didn't mind fooling around for a bit. She's incredibly agile for her size, quick as a …well, as a snake, and so incredibly strong when she fights Padfoot. He marvels at how fast she coils around him, how powerful and unshakeable her grip on him is.

Sirius has never in his life played with a snake, such shy creatures usually, so he's learning all sorts of things.

The other snakes, the normal ones, have returned now that Voldemort is back. They're all over the garden, though they flee away in terror when Padfoot comes their way. Sirius can't be sure, but he has the impression this amuses Nagini. Perhaps because she understands what the snakes are hissing; Sirius wishes so badly he could communicate with her, or that at least Voldemort would translate occasionally, but the bastard refuses, says he has better things to do with his time than play translator.

Of course, with Sirius there, Voldemort doesn't do much with his time. He cooks, they fuck, and then they leisure about the living room, listening to music and talking, or simply just existing in peace, Voldemort engrossed in some of the books Sirius gifted him, Sirius engrossed with Voldemort.

In the two occasions Sirius turns into Padfoot trying to bond with Nagini, Voldemort sits on a transfigured throne-like chair made out of tree branches, reads the newspaper, but occasionally his lips twist up into an almost smile when Nagini hisses especially loud.

(-)

Ever since they started seeing each other again, Voldemort enjoys reminding Sirius *every day*, one way or another, that Sirius left him to rot in Albania. It's nothing overtly combative, more like subtle remarks; Sirius honestly expected much worse. He lets these comments pass by, doesn't react to them- after all, he apologised for it, *once,* that first night at the cabin. He won't apologise again, especially since he is aware, and he knows Voldemort is aware as well, that Sirius had his reasons for leaving him in Albania.

He has experience with people incapable of admitting any blame, he raised four children, and helped raised four others, so it's easy not giving Voldemort any reaction.

One week into what Sirius perceives as their holiday, hidden from the world in the cabin, Voldemort *stops* doing it. Sirius even offers him some opportunities, but Voldemort ignores them.

He isn't sure why, and he knows it can't possibly be that Voldemort truly let it go, not after just a handful of months, but he's glad for the reprieve.

(-)

"You used to fly regularly," Voldemort says, one evening, as Sirius returns from chasing Nagini through the yard.

"I do," Sirius says. Ever since he got the bike back, Sirius flies it often. Once Harry and Orion heard of it from Marvolo, they love pestering Sirius about rides, to Astrid's and his mother's displeasure.

"It's safe," Sirius told Astrid. He offered to take her on a ride, to show her, put her at ease.

"I'd rather get trampled by a herd of hippogriffs," she assured him.

"You haven't in the past week."

Sirius frowns. "Well, no. I've nowhere to go." In reality, Sirius should tend to some business, but he's sure Regulus is filling in for him. Even if he isn't, Sirius will sort it out later.

"Hmm."

It takes Sirius almost an hour to figure out why Voldemort brought the bike up. *He* wants to ride it, but he won't say it.

With a grin, as Voldemort heads to the kitchen to prepare dinner, Sirius catches him by the waist. "How about we eat out tonight?" he asks. "We can go to muggle London. I can fly us there, if you can stomach getting on the bike again."

Voldemort puts up a modicum of resistance, waits for Sirius to convince him, before he agrees.

Really, Sirius truly is grateful for the patience his children taught him.

He wonders how many of these little clues he missed in the past, what with being young and oblivious, how many times Voldemort alluded to wanting something and Sirius didn't get it.

(-)

The boys are so excited, they are practically vibrating with it, fidgeting at Sirius' side.

Not Helix. He's busy trying to contort himself in Sirius' arms, in a futile attempt to steal his wand.

Astrid is…as always. Calm. Collected. She doesn't seem phased she's about to meet Britain's most notorious criminals. If anything, she's been slightly curious about Rodolphus, ever since Sirius brought it up that he wants his family to meet Bella's.

Bella has been insisting on it for months, but Sirius wasn't sure about Rabastan. His health, both physical and mental, improved considerably, from month to month, but only recently Sirius felt good enough about introducing him to his sons.

Not Harry, of course. Harry wouldn't want to meet the Lestrange brothers, and they don't want to meet him, either. All for the best, since Rabastan once referred to him as 'the little slayer'.

Harry's temper is such that he wouldn't be able to keep his mouth shut; Sirius loves that he's so outspoken, that he will definitely tell anyone what he thinks of them, but he doesn't want all that around the Lestranges.

And there they are, entering the living room. Rodolphus with Bella first, Rabastan and Evy behind them, the twins trailing after them.

Rabastan looks around, confused. He doesn't recognise the room, clearly, but that's not because of Azkaban and some lingering memory issues.

Sirius doesn't recognise his own living room, either. Apparently, at some point in the summer, Astrid redecorated parts of the manor again. He only vaguely remembers her talking about importing some furniture from gods know where, a couple of so weeks ago.

"Bella!" Helix forgets about the wand, twisting around again to wave at her.

She coos at him, as Rodolphus stops in front of Sirius. He has the usual look of utter contempt on his face as he nods in his direction, but it smoothes away into something vaguely polite when he turns to Astrid and Sirius introduces them.

Rodolphus takes her hand and lightly presses his lips over her fingers. "It is a pleasure to meet you," he says.

Astrid offers him one of her best smiles. "Likewise."

"And these are my sons," Sirius goes on. "Orion," he nods towards him, "Marvolo", another nod, "and this is Helix."

Rodolphus' eyes close in on Orion, measuring him with curiosity, before he extends his hand.

Orion is all too eager to shake it. “It is an honour to meet you, sir,” he says and Sirius rolls his eyes, even as Bella beams at Rodolphus’ side.

Sirius ignores them for a little bit, introducing Rabastan to Astrid. He, too, kisses her hand, but he truly is back to his former self, so he grins and gives her one of those smiles that used to make girls soon around him. “Tales of your beauty were not exaggerated, I see.”

Sirius rolls his eyes again. He feels he’ll be doing that a lot for the next hours.

Rodolphus is done with Marvolo, and now he’s peering at Helix. He frowns. “You were right,” he says, presumably speaking to Bellatrix. “It’s like a perfect copy.”

“Hold him,” Bella encourages.

“I’m good,” Rodolphus says, and it’s Bella that takes Helix from Sirius’ arms.

Orion and Marvolo hurry to shake Rabastan’s hand, too, as Bella tries to force Helix onto Rodolphus.

“Why are you so tall?” Rabastan asks Marvolo, when Regis and Regina join their little group, and Regis barely reaches Marvolo’s shoulder.

Rodolphus loses the battle, a little to the side, and now he’s holding Helix, but at arms length, as far away from him as possible.

“Rod,” Bella warns.

“What? You said he bites! And I remember Sirius bit me, too, when he was not much older-”

“I don’t bite!” Helix says, giggling, because his feet are just dangling in the air.

It takes them a while to get seated; the twins want to go outside and play, but Orion and Marvolo refuse, even if usually they can’t wait to get rid of adult supervision and wreak havoc in the gardens. Yet now they sit between Sirius and Astrid on one couch, eyes glued on Rodolphus.

Rodolphus, seated with Bella on another couch, is distracted by Helix crawling all over him, climbing on his back, muttering to himself.

The girls start talking amongst each other, Rabastan is still marvelling about how tall Sirius’ sons are, and Regina is telling Sirius all about a school rivalry that seems intense.

Once the initial awkwardness fades, and Helix bites Rodolphus a couple of times, things settle.

And it’s *good*. Bella is the happiest Sirius had seen her in ages, Rodolphus manages something only a handful of people can boast of by gaining Astrid’s approval, the kids finally wander off to the side to whisper amongst themselves, Rabastan and Evy look actually content-

This is how it was always supposed to be. Sirius wastes a few seconds mourning the fact that all the children grew without the Lestranges in their lives, and then he pushes that aside and enjoys the moment.

Over lunch, Bella takes Helix to sit in her lap, which means Astrid can actually enjoy a meal in peace, as it falls on Bella to convince Helix to eat, doing her best to arrange the food in ways that might tempt Helix to give it a try. She's only somewhat successful and eventually lets the boy go when he starts being more interested in flinging food at Marvolo instead of eating.

After lunch, the kids go outside to play, and the rest of them return to the living room.

If Astrid had hoped Bella wouldn't plop herself in Sirius' lap now that Rodolphus is there, she must be disappointed.

She and Rodolphus exchange a resigned, half annoyed look, and Bella laughs in Sirius' ear. "Ah, look, they're bonding."

"Do you want to play Quidditch with us?" Regis asks, bursting into the room, heading straight to Rabastan. "I'm stuck on a team with Marvolo, he sucks at it, and Regina and Orion are destroying us!"

Rabastan is clearly happy to do it, and Sirius goes after them; not only because he'd rather play with his sons than sit with the rest, but because -

Well, Rabastan is truly doing so much better, but perhaps it isn't wise to let him completely unsupervised with the kids, just in case he has an 'episode', as Bella calls it.

After a few fights, the kids decide to team up together against Rabastan and Sirius, and then proceed to clobber them.

"Shit, we're old," Rabastan says, with a laugh. "Look at these little demons, wheezing by."

"Should we bring out the bats?" Sirius jokes, because both he and Rabastan used to play Beater at Hogwarts.

Rabastan snorts. "Your kids make big targets. The fuck are you feeding them, mate?"

Sirius narrows his eyes. "Your kids make even better targets, what with that red hair standing out like Lucius' peacocks!"

They switch teams again, Blacks against Lestranges.

Marvolo truly sucks at the game, and Orion is now at an age where he doesn't feel comfortable getting aggressive with girls, so he lets Regina get away with awful fouls. A few years ago, he'd have pushed her off the broom, but finally it seems Astrid's and Sirius' insistences he's to act like a gentleman seem to have taken hold.

They lose, and Blacks are sore losers, but for once it's alright, because they all like seeing the twins celebrating with Rabastan once they land, laughing and hugging each other.

(-)

Once again, the Weasleys refuse to allow their son anywhere near the Blacks, even if Harry invites him over at the beginning of the summer. So, Sirius smirks when Arthur Weasely brings his multitude of children into the Ministry box, placing them quite close together.

“How could they afford this?” Orion asks Lucius, after Harry hurries to greet the red heads. “Did they sell one of their kids?”

Lucius chuckles, then proceeds to saunter over and humiliate Arthur, whose face goes as red as his hair. Draco, trailing behind him, makes an apologetic expression in Ron’s direction.

He’s a good actor, that boy. Takes after his mother. If Sirius didn’t know better, he’d actually believe Draco feels bad.

To his displeasure, Orion doesn’t bother with pretending. He makes a very loud comment about smelling something dirty, his narrowed eyes taking in Hermione. Marvolo backs him up, saying he, too, caught a whiff of something rotten, and Sirius sees Harry’s jaw muscle twitching.

“Settle down,” Sirius says, before Harry loses his temper.

Orion and Marvolo retreat to sit on either side of Astrid. Regulus is there too, whispering something to Elara, a hand on her shoulder, keeping her in place. Sirius assumes she wanted to make fun of Hermione with Orion and Marvolo, because he hears Regulus saying something like *‘it’s best we don’t even acknowledge such vermin at all*’.

Harry stays with Ron and Hermione, but Draco shakes Ron’s hand and goes to sit by Orion.

Lucius sits by Sirius, very satisfied with himself. “It never gets old,” he says. “I hope he lives a lengthy life, so I can bully him forever.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. He’s annoyed he couldn’t get to enjoy Lucius’ witty remarks, what with his worry over Harry and Orion.

“What’s up with Ludo? He doesn’t look like his usual cheery self.”

“He’s in trouble with the goblins, I hear. Again.” Lucius shakes his head. “Irresponsible gambler.”

When the Veela show up, Sirius and Lucius blindly reach behind them, to grab Orion and Draco, as the rest of the young boys leap from their seats to better look at them. Even some of the older men, embarrassingly.

“Harry! Stay away from the railings!” Sirius calls, when Harry wanders a little too close to the edge of the box.

Harry shakes his head, the Veela's charm letting go of him. He looks a tad dazed, but manages to control himself, and even take hold of Ron and stop him from jumping over.

Then Krum shows up, and everyone forgets about the Veela.

It's a slaughter, though. Krum might be an amazing flyer, but the rest of the Bulgarians are not doing so well.

They only score a single goal. When they do, Astrid applauds.

"Oh, come on, Mother! You're not Bulgarian!" Marvolo complains.

"And you're not Irish," she retorts.

Not that either care about the match; Marvolo only came because Orion came, and Astrid only came because Sirius begged her not to leave him alone with all the children.

Narcissa ignores them all, reading the latest issue of a French fashion magazine.

When Krum catches the snitch, everyone loses their minds. Lucius winces slightly at the noise. Regulus looks more animated than Sirius had seen him in years; he barely restrains himself from jumping up and down with excitement, it seems.

Elara does it for him- the only interest she has in common with her father. They're both obsessed with Quidditch, had never missed an important match in years.

"Can I marry him?" she asks, eyes following Krum.

"Let me find out who his parents are," Regulus answers.

(-)

Lucius gets drunk later that night, a rare occurrence, starts talking about having some fun with the muggles.

"Come on," he slurs. "They already have brain damage from all the mind wiping the Ministry subjected them to! We'll just spin them around for a bit, they won't even remember it-"

"No."

"We can go and get our masks, and-"

"Voldemort will be very pleased to hear Death Eaters attack at the Quidditch Cup, when he's pretending not to be back," Sirius says.

Lucius, well into his cups, waves it away. "He won't mind," he declares. "Avery, back me up!"

Avery doesn't look like he wants to back Lucius up, but he does, anyway. "Sure, Lucius, I'll come with you!"

"Oh, please, let them," Corban begs Sirius. "Let Lucius get in trouble for once- he only makes a bad decision once a decade! I want to have something to mock him over!"

"You're not helping!" Sirius hisses at him, grabbing Lucius by the shoulder. "Avery, sit, or I'll make you! Can someone bring Cissa over?"

"She'll only encourage him," Regulus mutters.

Sirius groans. "Fine! Alright, Lucius, we'll go torment the muggles. Let us drink to it!"

Lucius rewards him with a blinding smile.

It takes a few minutes, Sirius discreetly summons Kreacher, as the others laugh and toast, but eventually Sirius manages to spike Lucius' drink with a sleeping potion.

Once he falls unconscious, Sirius disbands the rest, sends Avery to look after Parkinson, as drunk as Lucius, and Corban goes back to his own tent to fight with his wife and mistress. Or fuck. Gods know, with them.

Sirius spends some moments burning with jealousy and frustration, because Corban has been living with his wife and mistress for years, has children with both, and people make a joke or two about it, but it's generally accepted, and Sirius will *never* be able to do the same with his wife and....he bursts out laughing when he realises Voldemort would be the mistress in this scenario.

The dark lord, terror of the United Kingdom, genius of magic, and mistress to Sirius Black.

I'm as drunk as they are, Sirius thinks, shaking his head to clear it.

When he leaves the Malfoy tent to head for his own, Ludo accosts him.

"Sirius! How is it going, mate? Wanna grab a drink?"

It's such a pity, the way Ludo turned out. Sirius remembers him from his childhood, all muscular and glorious on a broom.

James used to admire him so much, would badger Sirius to study the way Ludo played, so Sirius could learn 'a trick or two', and even Narcissa would agree how handsome he was.

"You need gold," Sirius says, as Ludo walks alongside him.

"I got into a speck of trouble with the goblins, truth be told-"

"Merlin's cock, Ludo! Do you never learn? You still owe me-"

"I'll give it back! This time, I promise I'll give it back! It's just been a rough couple of years, mate!"

Ludo owes everyone gold. Except Lucius. Somehow, even Ludo understood it's better to be in debt to the goblins than to Lucius.

"Come see me Monday, at Black Manor," Sirius says, and Ludo sighs with relief.

"Sirius! You're the best-"

"I want a favour."

"Of course! Anything you want! What can I do for you?"

(-)

"This cloak is a life-saver!" Ron says, taking the Cloak off, once they're far enough from the Weasley tent.

Sirius went to collect Harry, and whispered to him that he should get Ron to come along, too.

Marvolo is sleepy, Sirius took him out of bed for this, but he's happy to be included, trailing after Orion, who whispers excitedly with Draco and Elara, their heads bent together.

When they reach the Bulgarian's Minister tent, Ludo waits for them at the entrance, all a smile.

"Welcome, welcome!" he says. "Ah, young Mr Black, such an honour to meet you!" He grabs Orion's hand, shakes it vigorously. He moves to do the same with Harry, before he probably remembers Sirius' reputation of coming down hard on whoever tried to bother the boy, make a fuss about the 'Boy-Who-Lived' shit. So he just nods and greets Harry politely, before inviting them inside.

The Bulgarian players are arranged neatly in a row, standing to the right of the Minister.

Of course, all the kids head straight for Krum, asking for autographs.

Except Orion and Marvolo. Marvolo couldn't care less about Krum, he's rubbing his eyes, resting his head against Orion's shoulder, half-asleep.

But Orion loves Quidditch, and he talked about Krum for months, so excited about the World Cup.

"You don't want his autograph?" Sirius asks, because he did this for him. And Harry, of course.

Orion seems to fight an internal battle, biting his lip, before a side wins, and he arranges his face in an arrogant little snarl. It's still too *cute* to be considered anything but adorable, but Sirius gives him points for trying. "I will one day be the Head of House Black," he informs

Sirius. “I certainly won’t grovel to anyone for an autograph. If anything, Krum should ask for mine.”

Watching him, Sirius feels a mix of pride and pity, both siting heavily at the bottom of his stomach.

He has his own internal battle, a part of him wanting to tell Orion that he’s a child, that he should enjoy childish things, he’s still young enough that he doesn’t have to worry about-

But the other part agrees with Orion. So he says nothing. Not to Orion, at least.

He goes to talk to the Bulgarian Minister, asks him for a favour, too, and the man calls for Krum after a few minutes, barks something at the young man. Krum seems annoyed at what he’s hearing, but he nods and, not long after, he approaches Orion, and gifts him his broom.

“I appreciate it,” Sirius tells the Minister, watching the joy explode on Orion’s face as he grabs the broom.

“No need to mention it!” the man assures him in that harsh, broken English of his.

Draco yells at Lucius the next morning, at breakfast. “Where were you last night!? Orion got Krum’s broom! If you were awake, you’d have made it so I get it! Gods, *sleeping*? You’re getting old, Father!”

“Lower your voice,” Lucius snarls at him, clearly dealing with a bad hangover.

“But Orion got Krum’s broom! He’s not even a Seeker! I should have gotten it!”

“I’ll get you his fucking house, if you shut up right now!”

“Lucius!” Narcissa narrows her eyes at him. “Don’t swear!”

Draco keeps whining about the broom for the rest of the meal.

“How’s that ‘I want him to express his feelings’ method of parenthood working for you?” Sirius teases Lucius, handing him another glass of cold pumpkin juice.

“Remind me, when I get a grandson, not to repeat the same mistake,” Lucius whispers back, and Sirius laughs.

By the end of the day, when all the tents are packed and they’re ready to depart, Lucius found a way to get Krum’s uniform for Draco, mollifying him slightly.

“That poor boy,” Astrid mutters. “What will he think of us? He comes to England and you take his broom and his clothes!”

“It’s alright, his Minister will get him new ones, don’t you worry about it. I assure you, we’re not the first to do this.”

The kids are happy, it’s all Sirius cares about.

Even the tension between Orion and Harry vanishes, as they talk about Krum and pass the broom engraved with Krum's name between each other, talking about Wronski feint or whatever it is called.

(-)

"Who is Felix?" Voldemort asks one day, apropos of nothing.

Shit.

Sirius looks up from his crossword. It's obvious from Voldemort's expression he already knows who Felix is.

You did nothing wrong, Sirius reminds himself, when guilt tries to settle in the pit of his stomach.

Except for abandoning him in Albania while you fucked around Europe, another part of him reminds him.

"The vice-chancellor of Germany."

Voldemort's left eye twitches.

"That's not how you knew him."

"True. When I met him, he was Head of the International-"

"That's not what I meant." Voldemort's tone drops to something frosty.

"Didn't figure you for the type to ask questions you already have the answers for." Sirius' own voice shifts.

"I hear you were quite smitten."

"You heard wrong." Sirius does his best to return to a neutral tone, but he's struggling a bit.

Voldemort falls silent, glares at Sirius.

Must have been fucking Avery, telling him these things. Sirius will actually murder him one of these days; Lucius will just have to find a way to collect the gold Avery owes him from his children.

Seconds pass, and Voldemort doesn't stop glaring; Sirius doesn't want a fight, though it is so odd to suppress the side of him that never backed down from a confrontation.

"Here." He shoves the newspaper in Voldemort's lap. "Having trouble with that word." He points to the crossword.

Finally, Voldemort huffs, annoyed, but like the nerd he is, he can't help himself, and shifts his gaze to the newspaper, grabs Sirius' quill with too much aggression and starts scribbling furiously.

(-)

Father,

You owe me one hundred galleons. The hat didn't even suggest Ravenclaw. Straight to Slytherin. It's horrible. Everything is green. Wherever you look, this dreaded colour just assaults you! It clashes with everything I own. A disaster. I hate it. I hate Snape! How can they possibly allow him to dress like this? His hair is unwashed! There are no standards at this school! Only Professor Dumbledore has any decorum, even if his robes are a tad….out there.

Your son and heir is obnoxious. I hate him, too. I hate Draco. They both scorned me because I dared mention how ugly the Common Room is! It truly is ugly, Father! I said no lie, but they are so mean to me about it!

A madman is teaching Defence. He's half made of wood and looks entirely crazy. How could you let this happen? He's a famous Auror or something, don't you hate Aurors? It's such a ghastly sight, I don't know how I will stand having to look at him for the rest of the year! Is it not enough I have to look at Snape and his greasy hair?

Can I go to Durmstrang, please? Grandfather and Mother say they have much nicer uniforms, and that everyone washes there!

Marvolo (your spare)

"That is one cheery child," Voldemort comments, because Sirius receives the letter while in his company, and he reads it over his shoulder.

They had a minor fight about this. Sirius knows how paranoid Voldemort is about security in his home, but eventually Voldemort agreed to allow letters written by Sirius' *'direct descendants'* to reach the cabin.

Sirius is still working on a way to convince Voldemort to allow Harry's letters to find him, too, but it will take some time.

"He's a bit odd, alright?" Sirius says, defensive. "He'll grow out of it. It's A-Cissa's fault, he spent too much time around her and her fashion magazines."

"He's not wrong," Voldemort clarifies. "Well, I don't appreciate his take on Dumbledore, but he's not wrong about the rest."

Sirius sighs. He can already tell Marvolo will write weekly to bitch about Hogwarts. That is, if Sirius is lucky. If he isn't, he'll write daily.

Days later, he gets letters from Harry, who is awestruck by Moody.

Moody is "so cool" he's "been out there" he shows them all kinds of things.

Orion is suspiciously silent about Moody, doesn't mention him once, and Sirius knows that's because his son likes Moody, too, but wouldn't dare mention it to Sirius.

Unlike Harry, Orion must have been present for some of Sirius' rants against Aurors.

Surprisingly, by the month's end, Snape hadn't given a single detention to Marvolo, but Orion already collected six.

Harry writes home with glee that Moody treats Snape like shit. Sirius has a short dilemma, not knowing who to root for in this scenario.

"Does Draco like Moody too?"

"Oh, yes," Lucius tells him. "He doesn't say it, because…well. But he likes him. The man is there showing fourteen-year-olds how to resist the Imperius. Hard not to capture Draco's attention with this."

"And you're not upset? It irks me a little."

Lucius just shrugs.

Highly suspicious.

(-)

There's a very surreal moment when Sirius goes to see the first task; he's walking up the stands, and, as usual, they're all divided by houses. Sirius is heading to a sea of red and gold, all muscle memory, Harry is waving at him excited and -

Fuck. He looks to the other side where Orion glares at him, upset. Marvolo's eyebrows are raised high on his forehead.

Fuck.

Sirius walks up to Harry but doesn't sit.

"Hey, kiddo!" He ruffles his hair, and Harry makes a face, whining about it. Ron laughs. Hermione smiles up at him. "Enjoy it. I kind of have to sit with Lucius; we have some matters to discuss," Sirius says, lamely.

“Oh.” Harry frowns. “Oh, alright, I’ll come along.”

“To sit with the snakes?” another Gryffindor boy asks. Seamus something. Or maybe Dean. Sirius confuses them often.

“With my brothers,” Harry retorts, sharply and to Sirius’ relief, he trots after him.

No one question’s Harry’s presence in Slytherin stands. Harry sits between Draco and Orion, and Sirius next to Lucius. He barely sat, when out of nowhere a weight lands in his lap, black hair in his face.

“Missed you!” Elara says.

“Who are we rooting for?” Sirius asks, knowing his sons dislike the Hogwarts champion. Orion on principle, because *‘Hufflepuff, really?’* and Marvolo likes to pretend he hates everyone.

“Drumstrang,” Draco says, grinning. Harry elbows him in the ribs.

“Cedric is representing our school! At least you should take pride in that-”

“In a Hufflepuff?“

“I want them all to do badly,” Marvolo cuts over them. “Whatever it is, I hope they all fail spectacularly.”

Lucius and Sirius exchange a look. They know what’s coming. It was a pain in the arse to arrange transport for those dragons, without the muggles being any wiser.

“Well, I’m rooting for Viktor, too!” Elara declares.

“Get some standards, girl!” Sirius pinches her ribs, and she laughs, elbows him in the stomach and settles better in his lap.

“I am very partial to the lady,” Orion offers, with a grin.

Lucius laughs. “Your son and heir indeed.”

“She’s not even that pretty, Orion, come on!” Marvolo huffs. “And she’s French.”

“Yeah, Cho is prettier-”

“Not Chang again, ugh!” Draco makes a face at Harry.

All talk ends when the first dragon is brought forth.

Even Marvolo forgets to pretend he’s above it, and he sits up straighter.

Orion and Draco are split between watching the dragon or Miss Delacour. They both shout, horrified, when the girl gets singed and her robes stars fuming.

Diggory does well enough. No matter the jokes, everyone claps loudly for him, even in the Slytherin stand. Except Elara.

Krum shows there are some brains behind that thick skull of his. Elara cheers so loudly, and so close to Sirius' ear, he almost pushes her off him.

"YES! Way better than your French airhead, Orion!"

All in all, it was entertaining enough, and no one died, so Sirius takes it as a success. And Diggory gets the most points, even if Elara protests this judgment, booing loudly when the jury shows their marks.

"It's not fair! Diggory got the calmest, smallest dragon!"

"Alright, off with you before I go deaf!" Sirius says, gently setting her aside.

Sirius and Lucius stop to greet the twins on their way out, but just before they can leave, a voice stops them,

"Black!" Moody barks.

Sirius turns to stare at him, limping hard in their direction.

"What?"

"Just wanted to share that I find teaching your sons an exasperating experience, but they're not half as bad as you were."

"Better watch your mouth, Mad-Eye," Sirius warns. "My sons are worth ten of you."

"Fucking Blacks," Moody mutters.

Sirius prepares to say something nasty only-

There's only one man that consistently says that line like a mantra. There's something so familiar about the way he says it, too.

Moody smirks, a glint in his eyes. "Off you go! Wouldn't want to interfere between you and your boyfriend having a romantic afternoon. Some of us have jobs."

Lucius grabs Sirius by the arm and takes him away.

Fucking Blacks, Rodolphus likes to comment, often and loudly.

(-)

"What were you thinking? Rodolphus? Teaching? Are you insane? He hates children!"

Voldemort smiles, putting aside a sinister-looking globe he was poking at with his wand. “But the children like him, surprisingly. I hear he’s very popular.”

“Why?” Sirius demands, dumbfounded.

“I am monitoring Dumbledore. I won’t allow a Dumbledore and Moody reunion, you can imagine. Initially, Barty was supposed to do it, before Rodolphus volunteered. I assure you, Barty would have provided the students with a far more…interesting experience, to say the least.”

“Where is Moody?”

“Trapped in his own impossible to break out of trunk.” Voldemort says, satisfied. “Bella did the honours. I almost forgot what an excellent duelist she is. Took her less than five minutes to put Moody in his place.”

Sirius sighs, sits and rubs at his temples to stave off the headache.

Well, at least the boys are getting an excellent education this year, he thinks, so he avoids thinking of proud, unbent Moody rotting away in his own trunk.

“Can’t believe Dumbledore fell for it.” It’s shocking Dumbledore wouldn’t realise there’s an imposter parading around as his old friend. *Concerning*.

Then again, the man failed to miss Voldemort masquerading as his Defence teacher, so…

Perhaps Lucius is right and Dumbledore is, indeed, losing his touch, unfit to do his job.

“He’s growing senile,” Voldemort comments, returning his attention to his globe. “And Rodolphus is an excellent actor, it seems.”

Sirius snorts. “I saw through it in under a minute-”

“That’s because he wanted you to, make no mistake.”

“Doesn’t he want to stay with Bella? They’ve been apart for so long…”

Would explain why Bella was more bitchy than ever these past two months.

Voldemort stays silent for a handful of minutes. “He wants to feel useful,” he says, eventually, almost softly. “And it can’t last longer than a year, what with the curse. He’ll flee from Hogwarts before the second term ends.”

Sirius swallows. “And what will happen to Moody, then?”

A sinister expression graces those ethereal features. “Rodolphus will leave his corpse behind, for Dumbledore to find. I made sure he understands your sons and Lucius’ sensitive wallflower won’t witness any ghastly sights.”

(-)

“He’s upset with me.” Bella sips from her tea, lounging on a bench in the garden. “And he’s not like us, no, Rodolphus doesn’t just yell out whatever pops into his head. He hasn’t forgiven me yet for abandoning him, Rabastan and my lord. He needs to work through it. He needs some space.” She shrugs. “Besides, he’s already doing better. He comes to visit me when he can get away from Hogwarts. He came yesterday evening, and we fucked until morning-”

“Bella!” He throws a sugar cube at her. It lands in her hair, and she laughs. “Well, it’s not your fault, doesn’t he get that? I needed you there on my side, and-”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“No, I really needed you-”

“I know. It was a choice *I* made. Anyway, like I said, he’s doing better already. And it’s a great way for him to get to know the kids further. Yours and the twins. He’s liking them all, more and more. And he’s having fun bullying Snape.”

“If you say so.” Sirius bites his lip. “But if he’s upsetting you, or -I don’t know. I can talk to him. I can kick his arse, if you want, or-”

She laughs again. “You’re a darling. But I’m fine. We’re going to be fine.”

“I’m surprised *mine* isn’t more upset,” Sirius confesses. “He even stopped mentioning it, alluding to it in any way. Honestly, I expected much worse. *Far* worse.”

Voldemort really seems to have forgiven Sirius.

“That’s because he knows he’s the one who fucked up,” she points out. “He knows it was his fault. Shh,” she cuts over him when he opens his mouth. “He knows it, I know it, and you should know it too, regardless of what delusions you forced yourself to entertain about the matter. It was his fault. He has no one to blame but himself. With Rodolphus…it was my fault.”

“Bella…”

She waves it away. “No, no. Don’t sit there imagining I’m drowning in guilt or regret. I’m not the type, you should know by now. I do not regret anything- I acted according to my convictions at the time, and I do not regret them. I didn’t force Rodolphus to follow me to Longbottom’s house- he could have done as he initially wanted and left the country. That was his choice, and I know he does not regret it, either. You know I am always true to my instincts. But, objectively, leaving him in Azkaban, not going after my lord, is on me.”

She really does not look regretful. Her eyes are clear, her posture calm; Bella looks as ready as always. For everything.

“You truly are super-human, do you know that?” Sirius asks her, something warm settling inside his chest.

There really is no one like her on Earth.

She smiles. “I know,” she agrees.

Sirius rolls his eyes in mock exasperation. “Do you think *he* regrets it?” his voice comes out in a whisper. “Or is he also the type to never regret acting on his convictions?”

“Hmm.” She takes another sip of her tea. “He regrets it,” she declares, after giving the thought some consideration. “But I wouldn’t expect an apology if I were you. That would be as delusion as Rodolphus expecting one.”

Sirius snorts. “I’m not an idiot,” he assures her. “I apologised-”

“Well, then, you are an idiot-”

“No, no. Listen. I am sorry. I-” He sighs. “In a way, I don’t regret anything, either. I don’t regret siding with James and Harry, I don’t even regret leaving him in Albania for a decade, but I am still sorry he suffered, you know?”

“Still with that soft heart, Sirius,” she chides him, with a smile. “And I thought it was gone.”

“I am not soft!”

She laughs even harder than before, and he throws more sugar cubes at her, until he annoys her enough she take out her wand and they have a good, old fashioned duel, spells flying along with laughter, and grunts, and insults.

They hunt down Rabastan after, and they have a pleasant lunch.

(-)

“Is there something wrong, Sirius?” Astrid asks one night, after they put Helix to bed.

“With?”

“You haven’t visited my room in quite a while.”

There it is. Sirius’ stomach twists with guilt. He knew she figured out he’s having an affair, but this is the first time she addresses it. Of course, she won’t outright say it, not *yet*, but…

“Should I lose some weight?” she asks, twisting the knife. “Gain some, maybe?”

Gods, stop. “No, you’re perfect.”

He goes to her room that night.

It feels like cheating, which is absurd. Sirius cheated on her, so many times, and he never felt guilt, never thought twice about it, but now it feels like cheating.

(-)

Snape's cryptic letter insinuated Orion did something and that the 'guardian of the other party got involved'.

It's so fucking early, on a Sunday morning, and Sirius had barely slept in days, taking care of Helix who is recovering from dragon pox.

Sirius is already irritated. It must show on his face, because the Prefect that leads him to McGonagall's office looks terrified of him, keeps glancing fearfully over his shoulder at Sirius.

Oh, for fuck's sake, Sirius thinks, when he enters the office and sees McGonagall, Snape, Orion, a pudgy boy and Augusta Longbottom.

Sirius remembers Snape sent him another note at the beginning of the week about Orion doing something to Longbottom, but he didn't pay attention, as it was the first day of Helix' illness, and that boy does not suffer in silence.

He thought the matter was solved by now.

Apparently, it escalated.

McGonagall is yelling something about cruelty, and that 'Neville could have got really hurt'.

"He looks fine to me," Snape says, looking down at the boy over his crooked nose. "Or at least as fine as he was yesterday."

Orion smirks.

"He fell down three flights of stairs!" McGonagall shrieks.

"How is that my problem?" Orion demands. "He always trips over his own legs-"

"Silence!" Snape barks at him. "I understand Mr Longbottom often has issues navigating the castle, Minerva."

The boy grows bright red. "That's not true! I haven't forgotten about the tricky steps since second year! I didn't trip! He cursed me!" He points to Orion.

"I was in my Common Room last night," Orion says.

“Liar! I saw you! You laughed and said-”

“It is true, Black was in the Common Room all night, serving detention.”

“For who?” McGonagall asks. “I don’t have any note that he was in detention-”

“For me,” Snape says. “I didn’t think there was a need to report it, since it’s an internal matter. Black was in the Common Room. Or,” he glares at Longbottom. “are you calling *me* a liar?”

The boy physically shrinks back from Snape, hides behind his grandmother.

Even Sirius heard about the previous year, when Remus was teaching them how to deal with Boggarts and coached Longbottom, who apparently lives in terror of Snape, on how to turn the Slytherin into a laughing matter, dressing him in his grandmother’s clothes.

Embarrassing, he thinks, watching the boy shrink like that, hide like a five-year-old.

Briefly, he thinks of his parents; of brave Frank and stubborn Alice, loud and opinionated, ready to defend themselves and others, no matter the danger.

Augusta must be thinking along the same lines, because she snaps at her grandson, a frail hand grips his shoulder and she hisses something at him. Sirius catches ‘stand straight’ and ‘don’t be a coward’.

McGonagall asks him what Orion said to him after he cursed him, but the boy’s eyes keep turning to Snape, and he stutters, and McGonagall loses patience with him, orders him to speak up.

Everyone is bullying Longbottom, even those on his side.

Orion’s smirk grows larger, all satisfied, and Sirius has the urge to smack him.

“So,” Sirius cuts over McGonagall. “There’s no proof Orion cursed him. Why am I standing here at eight in the morning?”

McGonagall’s eyes turn to him. Every year, she looks less and less impressed with Sirius. Ever since Voldemort came back, there’s something like hate in her gaze, that was never there before.

It would hurt Sirius, who always respected her, who cannot forget how she stood up for him when he was younger; alas, few things can hurt Sirius these days.

“He cursed Mr Longbottom Monday, and Thursday,” she says.

“And he got detention for it,” Snape points out. “The matter was settled.”

“And now Neville spent the entire night in the hospital room, with a broken arm and leg. He says it was your son, and I have no reason to doubt him.”

Sirius shrugs. He nods towards Snape. “This one says Orion was in the Common Room. If you trust a child over your fellow teacher and Head of House, that sounds like a staff problem, not something I need to put up with. On a Sunday. *At eight o’clock*,” he repeats.

That makes McGonagall’s cheeks redden. “Of course I trust Severus,” she says, yet her eyes briefly look towards Snape and there’s something there, something Sirius recognises from his own days in the Order. Oh, McGonagall never looked at him like that, but everyone else did. That flicker of doubt, always there.

No one trusts Snape fully, not now that Voldemort is back and Snape is in contact with him. There’s always going to be that shred of doubt tainting everything Snape does or says.

Dumbledore trusts him, but Dumbledore never could force others to trust those deemed untrustworthy.

“Orion could have snuck out, at some point, without Severus’ knowledge-”

“He didn’t.” Snape’s tone is colder than ever. He caught that glance, too. He probably gets it often. Whenever someone can’t find him, whenever he looks tired or gives the slightest sign that *‘he’s gone bad’*. “Unlike others, I have complete control over my charges. I know where they are, at all times. Black did not leave the Common Room.”

Of course, Snape blatantly lying doesn’t help his cause at all.

Sirius has no doubt Orion is the reason Longbottom took a tumble down the stairs.

As Snape turns on his heels and storms out, Sirius and Orion go after him and no one protests.

He hears Augusta yell at her boy behind them. “Why don’t you ever stand up for yourself? Why do you allow them to do this to you?”

“You’ve raised a cruel, vicious bully, to no one’s surprise,” Snape hisses at Sirius, as soon as they’re in the hallway. “Best take him under control before he kills someone.”

“I thought you can control your students,” Sirius snaps back.

Orion snorts somewhere behind them.

Sirius makes a dismissive gesture. “Retreat to your cave, before one of your little snakes gets into more trouble, *Professor*. You’re wholly unqualified to look after children.”

Snape glares at him. “Our Quidditch team brooms need updating,” he says, through gritted teeth. “And some of my students need new cauldrons.”

“I’ll see to it,” Sirius hisses back. “Though no broom on earth can save your Quidditch team.”

Harry demolishes all the other Houses, every year.

He knows that was always the ‘deal’, in Slytherin, a tradition Slughorn started, decades ago. When one of his students got in trouble, Slughorn stood by them against the other teachers, and then made the parents pay.

Snape continues his longstanding tradition, though unlike Slughorn who asked for personal favours, Snape asks for things for Slytherins, in general.

Since Draco, and now Orion, arrived at Hogwarts, prone to getting into trouble, Sirius doubts there’s a single Slytherin that needs to use a second-hand book, cauldron or robe.

Snape scurries away, and Sirius turns to Orion. “Why would pick on that boy? Look at him, for Merlin’s sake! I didn’t think you’d be the sort of person to pick on the weak and helpless.”

Orion narrows his eyes. “He had an unexpected moment of bravery. He chose his words poorly.”

Something twists in Sirius’ stomach. Just like that, he can imagine what made Orion target Longbottom.

Bully as he is, Orion would never normally bother someone so defenceless.

He remembers the previous year, when Orion got into a fight with half of the Ravenclaw kids, because they tormented Lovegood’s crazy daughter, stole her things and hid them around the school. *“That’s not right,”* he said, outraged, when Sirius asked him what was he thinking, seeking a fight with six Ravenclaws, all way older than he was.

Orion even snapped at Harry and Draco when they referred to the girl as ‘Loony Lovegood’.

So he knows what this means, what poor Longbottom might have done to make Orion go after him.

“Marvolo was minding his own business, with his friends,” Orion says, “gossiping and laughing around at the edge of the lake, where Longbottom was apparently studying some plants or whatever. Marvolo said he was telling Annie how beautiful Bella’s robes or makeup or whatever - anyway, he was singing Bella’s praise, and there Longbottom came and started yelling how she’s rotten and evil.”

Sirius closes his eyes for a second. *Shit.*

“You know what Bella did to his parents,” he says, quietly.

He never told the boys, they never talked about it, but he knows they know. *Everyone* knows.

Orion’s jaw ticks. He looks away. “Marvolo is not even twelve. Longbottom found his spine to yell at a little kid. How unlucky for him that he chose the wrong kid to yell at.”

“Surely, you can understand why the boy lost his temper.”

Orion shrugs. “I understand. And you should understand why *I* lost it. I get he’s …upset, what with his family. But Marvolo and Bella are *my* family. And you taught me to defend my family.”

“When it needs defending. Neville is no threat, he didn’t hurt Marvolo. He’s just an orphan that lost his temper and yelled-”

“You should hear how he spits out our name, like it’s dirt.” Orion grows angrier by the second. “And not just him. Plenty of people do. Most of them Gryffindors. And Harry lets them. And I had to bite my tongue, so I won’t upset him. But there’s a limit to it, and Longbottom crossed it. I’m done shutting up. From now on, when someone has something to say about Blacks, I’ll put them in their place, Harry’s friends or not, defenceless or not.”

Sirius knows what it feels like, remembers growing up thinking his family is the best, that everyone loves the Blacks, that everyone bends backwards to get into their favour; he remembers coming to Hogwarts and how shocked he’d been that not everyone likes his family.

How hard it was to accept it. To stand in the Gryffindor Common Room and do nothing when someone made a snide remark. However, he *understood* why some people disliked his family.

“I think Neville already knows Blacks aren’t to be trifled with,” Sirius says, carefully.

“Clearly, he hadn’t learned that lesson, yelling at a Black, about another Black-”

“Gods damn it, Orion! His parents are living vegetables that will never leave St Mungo’s mental ward-”

“I don’t care!” Orion yells. “What do you want from me? You taught me to stand up for my family and now you reprimand it for it!? I don’t care about his stupid parents-”

“Orion!”

“I don’t! It was war! Isn’t that what you told Harry, huh? When he asked you why you sided with *him*? And *he* killed Harry’s parents, yet you are on his side, anyway! So don’t preach to me about Longbottom’s parents, as if you care about things like that! You’re just looking for reasons to berate me, as always!”

Sirius feels his blood turn to ice.

Silence falls over the hallway, and Sirius struggles to cling on to control.

Orion realises he crossed so many lines- all of them- and he swallows, lowers his gaze, but it’s far too late for that.

Sirius has the overwhelming urge to hit him, but he reminds himself this is his son, even if he doesn’t like him very much right that second. He reminds himself Orion is no longer five, and things can’t be solved with a quick spanking.

He lacks practice- no one dared to speak to him in this manner, not for a very long time. Sirius forgot how to handle it; at least he forgot how to handle it in non-violent ways.

If anyone else had said what Orion said, they'd be dead.

"Father," Orion's tone lost all of its hostility. "I-I.. "

"Shut up," Sirius says, quietly, because he's afraid that if he raises his voice, that if he allows any edge to the anger, it will all spill out. "Enjoy the rest of the semester, walk around the grounds as much as possible, because when you return home, you won't be leaving your room at all. And that will be the least of your problems," he threatens.

Orion says nothing, shoulders around his ears.

Sirius forces himself to step away from him, turn around and leave.

At noon, he gets a letter from Harry, angry sentences about how Orion attacked Neville, how Neville had to spend all night in the Hospital Wing, how it's been going on for a week, and how cruel Orion is.

He throws it in the fireplace, pours himself another drink.

Of course that's the moment when Bella comes to see him; she doesn't even visit that often anymore, once or twice a week, but Sirius is not surprised when she enters his office; the only one in the universe to enter without knocking.

She frowns when she sees him. "What's with the face? What happened?"

Sirius tells her, getting angry all over again.

"That little shit." Bella shakes her head, her curls flying about. "If you'd have talked like that to your father, he'd have skinned you alive."

There's not even the slightest twinge on regret, guilt- *anything*- on her face. Not that he expected it; he's mostly angry because *he* still feels that guilt.

She'll never have to look at Neville, a wreck of a boy, a shadow of his parents, and if Bella had to face the child, she wouldn't feel anything; knowing her, she'd mock the boy.

She's your soulmate, something whispers in his head. *You're no better, not really.*

Why did you torture them into insanity? Why didn't you just kill them? Sirius wants to yell at her, but he doesn't. He never asked her. They never talked of it.

He knows why.

Because she wanted to, simple as that. There was nothing to gain from it, there was no rhyme or reason to it.

“I see you’re not in the mood to talk and you’ll make terrible company, so I’ll leave you to it,” she says, standing.

“You disgust me, sometimes,” he says, opening another bottle.

But she’s his mirror, he sees himself when he looks at her.

He sees himself, betraying James, spitting on his memory, every time he climbs in bed with Voldemort. Betraying *Harry.* And that’s what disgusts him, not Bella.

She rolls her eyes. “You’ll get over it. Gods, you’re so annoying when you pretend you have a conscience.”

At least, by night, Helix’s pocks disappeared completely, there’s no trace of a fever left, and at dinner he wants to eat, ravenous. That means Sirius can leave, so he does, right after he puts Helix to bed.

He only knows of one person that will make him feel better.

(-)

“He’s right,” Sirius confesses to Voldemort. “Everything Orion said was true, and I punished him for it.”

Voldemort runs his fingers through Sirius’ hair. They’re on the couch, Sirius’ head in Voldemort’ lap, venting about his issues. And Voldemort listened, carefully, as he always does.

“You’re overthinking it,” he says. “It was a child’s squabble, at the end of the day. And children often say and do odious things. You certainly shouldn’t bend your ear to it; Orion’s logic is flawed- he knows it, too, he only said it in anger. It’s obviously not the same.”

“How is it not the same?” Sirius laughs, though it’s humourless. “I, too, told an orphan-”

“You raised Potter like a pampered little prince, you gave him everything he wanted, and more. You’d give your life for him, you certainly gave up so much for him,” and there’s that reproach again, but Voldemort doesn’t linger on it. “How would you think it compares to Orion cursing that Longbottom boy and dismissing his parents?”

Sirius sighs. He was right; Voldemort does make him feel better. Though he needn’t have even bothered to talk; as always, when Sirius entered the home, his anger and guilt already faded away; everything fades away when he’s with Voldemort.

“Snape is not on your side, by the way,” Sirius says. He hadn’t said it so far, because Voldemort is into his ‘no war talk’ phase, and Sirius vengefully thought ‘let him figure that one out on his own’. “He’s Dumbledore’s creature, through and through.”

“I know.”

Sirius raises an eyebrow. “You do? You always liked him.”

“*Like him*.” Voldemort snorts. “I like you and Bellatrix. I respect Rodolphus. I tolerate Lucius. I do not *like* Severus or anyone else.”

Sirius feels his lips stretching into an involuntary smile.

“I saw the potential in him. He was always a pawn, nothing else. And now he’s turned against me.”

“Did you use Legilimency?”

Voldemort waves it away. “No need.” A small silence, in which Voldemort searches Sirius’ face. “I wouldn’t have understood, if not for-” His fingers tighten, slightly, in Sirius’ hair. “I understand now, however, that Severus would never be on my side after I killed the woman he wanted.”

He understands because he has Sirius. Because he wants Sirius, and he’d destroy whoever hurts Sirius.

“What will you do about him?”

“I’ll use him to feed Dumbledore whatever information I want him to have. The way one uses a double spy. Surely, you remember it.”

And now Sirius’ dark mood is gone entirely, his heart is light, and he grins. “No, not really. You didn’t use me too much, did you?”

He never used Sirius against Dumbledore, or the Order. No, Voldemort was only ever interested in Sirius for who Sirius is, nothing else.

(-)

Every morning he is home, after breakfast, Sirius retreats to his office for some minutes, with his coffee, where several newspapers await him; his father used to read them all, news from all over the world, but Sirius doesn’t have the patience, so he only reads the front pages; he trusts that if he were to miss something important happening in another country, something that could affect Britain, Lucius would surely bring it up at some point.

It’s a boring affair, and pretty useless, because Sirius has bribed or threatened plenty of journalists into silence or into writing flattering articles, enough to never trust in media integrity.

Alas, it’s a habit he formed, so he sits down with his mug, and prepares himself for boredom.

He does not expect, once he reaches the German gazette, for Felix' face to take up most of the front page.

He puts down his coffee, and a knot forms in his chest, when he takes in the title.

Felix is missing.

And if the newspaper reported on it, it means he's been missing for a while, already, but most likely his family tried to hide it until they couldn't, anymore.

He reads the article, a sense of doom settling in his stomach with every word.

No one had seen him in weeks, he failed to show up at several Ministry meetings, and if the German people know anything about Felix, it's that he takes his work seriously. He might be an arsehole, but that man would never miss such important meetings.

"Family declined to comment," it says, showing a picture of Elke, his wife, and their son, rushing outside the German Ministry Building.

The Law Enforcement Department told the journalists that the matter is under investigation, and not much else.

Sirius leans back into his armchair, closing his eyes.

There's a bitter sense of betrayal taking over him, mixed with the beginning stage of anger.

It could be someone else' fault, he tries to tell himself. Felix made plenty of enemies, as the article mentions- the journalists don't even know half of it, really. So many people want that man dead.

It could be -

But it doesn't work. The doubt, the betrayal that started growing as soon as he saw the title-

He doesn't want to think it was Voldemort, but a part of him knows it is, and it hurts, pierces through the trust he tries so hard to have in Voldemort.

(-)

Corban definitely thinks it was Voldemort, too, when Sirius goes to see him. He doesn't say it, of course, but it's obvious in his eyes.

"You didn't tell me," Sirius spits at him. "You're related, you knew about this-"

"I knew, yes," Corban admits. He is Elke's second cousin, and he and Felix share one great grandfather, and a great aunt. "My uncle told me of it two weeks ago. It's a family matter. I

was not at liberty to-"

"Piss off, Yaxley! Family matter?! Your family is *here*. Your loyalty should be *here*. You knew the German Vice-Chancellor has been missing for two weeks and you failed to inform m-us?This is why we don't like foreigners," he spits out. "One can never trust you lot!"

That's a stretch, since Yaxley is as British as any of them, really, but Sirius is beyond mad.

"Who did it, then? What does your stupid uncle say-"

"I don't know, Sirius. Since my *real* family is here, the Germans wouldn't trust me enough with that information. But I don't think they know what happened to him, either."

Their eyes meet. Yaxley is pissed off, too. He looks at Sirius with something close to accusatory. As if it's Sirius' fault.

It is. It is, you know it is.

When he Apparates to Malfoy Manor, he doesn't find Lucius, and the elf tells him he heard his master saying to his mistress that he is going to see Sirius, so Sirius returns to Grimmauld, where, indeed, Lucius is speaking with Astrid in the living room.

She's laughing at something he said, and Lucius looks like he always does, nothing on his face betrays any emotion, yet when he excuses himself and follows Sirius to his office, he immediately says "I had no idea about any of this" as soon as the door closes behind them. "I learned it from the paper, this morning. I swear."

"Do you think Voldemort did it?" It's worse to say it out loud. It makes it real.

Lucius says nothing for some seconds, keeps his unreadable expression. "Not many men would manage to disappear a Vice-Chancellor," he says, carefully. "Felix is hated, deeply, by many, yet his family is influential, interconnected with many other noble European families. Everyone should know better than to start a feud with them. This is the work of someone that doesn't care about any of that."

Voldemort never gave a fuck about *any of that*, indeed.

"The good news," Lucius says, and Sirius glares at him, because what can possibly be good about any of this, "is that if it was *him*, no one will figure it out, and it won't fall on our heads. We really don't need a diplomatic…incident with Germany, on top of everything else going on."

Sirius didn't even think about that. He's busy with his own feelings, but yeah, if the Germans find out a Brit assassinated their Vice Chancellor, for no reason-

"Fuck," he hisses.

Lucius shrugs. "Let's be honest; Felix had so many enemies inside his own country, even outside of it- their law enforcement will not think to look here, would they? There's hardly

anything concrete to connect him to us. They'll look in more obvious places, someone else will take the fall, and …well. That will be that."

Sirius wants to demand Lucius stops thinking of himself all the damn time, wants to ask *'what about me? How am I suppose to deal with this, how am I supposed to be alright with it?'* but he abstains.

Won't solve anything.

(-)

Sirius cannot simply ignore it. Gods, he'd love to, because he's reluctant, *at best*, to start any sort of confrontation with Voldemort, but this is-

He can't just- Felix didn't deserve this. At least not because of Sirius.

But fighting with Voldemort won't solve anything, a part of him says. *It won't help Felix, and you won't leave Voldemort over it, so why bring it up at all?*

Sirius doesn't like that part of himself. It's one thing to let the past go, to allow Voldemort to act as if he wasn't the one that fucked everything up and destroyed a big chunk of their lives, but it's quite another to perpetually ignore stuff like this.

He has to at least say something.

No, you don't. You'll just end up even angrier. Voldemort will deflect any blame, he'll show no remorse, and you'll just grow more frustrated.

He can't avoid it, though. Even if he'd make himself shut up, Voldemort immediately notices Sirius' mood when Sirius enters the cabin.

Not only that, but when he asks what's wrong, it's clear he already knows what bothers Sirius.

So Sirius just goes to the desk, fishes out the newspaper from a stack of them, and gives it to Voldemort, who does not even glance at it.

"I had nothing to do with it."

Sirius wants to believe him. He wants it so *badly*. He would do anything to go back to when he would trust anything Voldemort said.

He just *can't.*

Of course, now Voldemort is mad- well, actually, only Voldemort is mad.

Sirius wishes he'd be angry, but he's just sad.

It does say something about them, however, that even in these circumstances, Sirius doesn't leave, and Voldemort doesn't kick him out.

They spend the rest of the evening together, even if it's silent and tense; even if Voldemort retreats to his torture barn for an hour or so, and Sirius just lays on the couch and stares at the ceiling.

But Voldemort returns, and he cooks, they eat, they go to bed together and in the morning, when Voldemort wakes Sirius up by bringing him coffee and scones, breaking his old rules about anything food related staying in the kitchen, Sirius manages to smile at him, and mean it, too.

Sirius gets angry at Bella, instead, it's easier that way.

"Why would you tell him about Felix?" he demands of her, when next he sees her.

"He already knew about him! She throws her hands into the air. "He had stacks of newspapers, probably everything published about you in the past ten years-"

"No newspaper talked about me fucking him!"

"Morgana's tits, he knew already when he asked me! What, you think you were being discrete? Yaxley knew, Avery knew, plenty of people knew! I didn't tell him anything that he didn't know!"

"He went ahead and killed him!"

She sighs. "I liked Felix, you know I liked him, but he was a piece of work; not like anyone would miss him, really!"

"His *family* will miss him!"

"Not his wife," Bella mutters. "Lovely woman, that Elke. Oh, stop glaring at me! If you found out my lord was off having a sweet little romance with some man, after he abandoned you in a forest to suffer, wouldn't you kill said man? Huh?"

Sirius opens his mouth, closes it, pure rage coursing through him just imagining Voldemort touching another man.

"Yeah, thought so," Bella says, smugly. "Stop acting like Evy, Sirius. You knew very well what type of man my lord is when you jumped into his bed, when you chose to resurrect him. What did you expect would happen?"

(-)

Things remain tense between them for the next week; Sirius is upset, no matter how he tries to rationalise it, and Voldemort seems angry about Sirius being upset. They only see each other once throughout the week, and Sirius has a hard time sleeping, getting snappier and snappier with people around him.

And then, one morning, he opens the newspaper and he sees Felix, alive and well, prancing about magical Berlin, journalists hounding after him.

(-)

He looks a bit thin, a bit tired, but otherwise- yes, Felix is alive, indeed, when Sirius goes to visit him.

His wife rolls her eyes when an elf leads Sirius into the living room. “The nerve,” she mutters, not even giving Sirius time to greet her, standing and leaving with an annoyed huff.

Sirius did send a letter announcing his visit, so he doesn’t feel bad at all. If she didn’t want to see him, then she could have just fucked off before he arrived, he figures. Although, it is possible Felix failed to inform her Sirius was dropping by; wouldn’t be the first time, after all.

Either way, that’s not his problem.

Felix doesn’t stand. “I was surprised to hear from you.”

Bella once said Felix looks like Voldemort; Sirius can’t see it. He couldn’t see it in the past, and he definitely can’t see it now.

There’s the dark hair, dark eyes, the threatening aura and malice hanging ominously in the air. But Voldemort is so much more than that, in every way.

He sits, uninvited. “Wanted to make sure you’re fine.”

A perfectly sculpted eyebrow rises, ever so slightly. “I didn’t imagine you’d care.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“I wrote to you,” Felix goes on. “For *years*.”

Sirius could have handled their separation better, it’s true. As it is, he left one morning, while Felix was still sleeping, and then never answered his letters.

He just panicked, didn’t know how to handle whatever was happening between them, what it was transforming into.

Sirius won't talk about that; why would he? He can't apologise, and even if he were to apologise, is not like it would fix anything.

"What happened?" he asks, instead.

Felix stares him down in silence for a handful of seconds.

"It is of no concern to you," he answers, finally. "Rest assured, it has been dealt with. An embarrassing thing, really. My ego is bruised, but let us just say the other party has worse things to worry about than pride." He smirks. "No, that's not quite right. In fact, they have *nothing* at all to worry about anymore."

Can't worry when you're dead, after all, Sirius thinks. He breathes out in relief.

So it wasn't Voldemort. When he saw the newspaper with Felix alive, Sirius was elated, of course, but then worried Voldemort kept him locked up somewhere, and then simply released him when he noticed Sirius wasn't letting it go.

"You needn't have bothered with a personal visit," Felix goes on. "Why did you?"

Sirius doesn't really know how to answer that. How to say, 'just wanted to make sure my man wasn't responsible'.

Felix drops his icy attitude. He gives a little sigh.

"I hear troubling rumours coming from England. The International Federation is growing concerned, especially after that Azkaban of yours fell."

"Not their business."

Felix snorts. "Germany was hardly their business, yet they've interfered, and now they won't leave." Some venom colours his words.

Felix is extremely frustrated with the Federation that, indeed, still has hit wizards in Germany, on the pretence of guarding Grindelwald and monitoring his suspected followers.

"You know how they are; they *make* it their business."

"They're welcomed to try," Sirius says. "They'll find….considerable resistance in England."

The Federation only moved to action once Dumbledore *already* defeated Grindelwald. The cowards tried fighting him, for a decade, got their arses handed to them, and learned to stay far away from Germany when Grindelwald was in control.

Once he was safely locked up, they showed up and cleaned up his remaining followers, set up the trial for Grindelwald. Not that it was a real trial, just a procedure to make sure they cover all their tracks. Grindelwad was not even allowed to attend said trail, nor to defend himself through legal means. Not that it would have made a difference, but *still*.

Sirius doubts the Federation is eager to face Voldemort directly. They're probably waiting for Dumbledore to do their job again.

"Besides, our issues will remain local. There is no threat beyond our island; there is no risk to European security. The Federation would be wise to ignore it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say the there is no risk beyond your island, Sirius," Felix says. "The threat is *certainly* not contained."

"It is," Sirius insists. In the past, Voldemort barely seemed interested in taking over England. He barely seems interested, even *now* that he returned with something to prove, let alone the rest of Europe or the world.

"You've come here because *you* don't believe the threat will stay inside England. You came here because you thought he had something to do with my disappearance."

Sirius opens his mouth, reconsiders. He hesitates for a handful of seconds, before finally admitting to it.

"It would have been a *personal* matter, not a threat to international security."

Felix gives him a look. "When he accosted me in the middle of the street and ransacked through my mind, it absolutely was a a threat to international security, since my head holds quite a lot of sensitive, political information."

Gods damn it. Fuck. All the relief he felt before goes out the window.

"What?" His voice comes out barely above a whisper.

"Yet he didn't look for that type of information; oh, no. When all that came forward were memories of you…I realised who this unhinged stranger was."

Sirius just stares at him, shocked.

Shocked Felix *survived* it. "He- when was this?"

"About two years ago." Felix stands, walks to his liquor cabinet.

"I'm-" *sorry*. Sirius feels awfully guilty for getting Felix involved in all this. "I wish I didn't place you in that situation-"

"Wouldn't be the first time a disgruntled lover, father, brother, an occasional wife hunts me down. And, as unpleasant as it was, I am glad it happened." Felix cuts over him, fills two glasses with whiskey. "I finally had some answers for your behaviour. I finally understood."

Felix always did try to figure out why Sirius was so closed off emotionally. Sirius suspects Felix believed he had been in love with James, since Sirius would never talk about him, no more than to explain Harry is the son of his friend, for whose death he was incarcerated.

"What did he do to you?"

Felix comes back from the cabinet, hands a glass to Sirius before resuming his seat.

“Besides helping himself to my mind and leaving me with the worst headache of my life, you mean?” He takes a sip. “He tried removing the memory of our encounter. Well, he didn’t just try, he obscured it quite well. A hard thing to do considering my training in Occlumency. Alas, he had no way of knowing I am married to the most paranoid woman in existence. Elke insists I get checked by a mind healer every three months.” He smiles. “I have a great mind healer. He found something amiss and I managed to recover the memory.”

Sirius downs his glass in one go. For a while, they don’t say anything, only the great grandfather clock ticking away the minutes, as he tries to process everything he learned.

“You have someone checking your head every three months?” he finally asks, because it’s easier than talking about the other things.

“Elke says it’s a necessity, what with the dubious company I keep. I do hate it when she’s right, you know that, but by the gods, she was right on this occasion.”

Sirius nods, absentmindedly. “She always is.”

“She got me out of my latest…adventure, too. I’ll never hear the end of it. I’ve only been back for two days and I am already sick of that smug expression on her face. Horrid woman.”

“I like her.”

“She’d like nothing more than beheading you.”

Elke, of course, despises Sirius, but he always liked her. Astrid loved her, and Astrid doesn’t love anyone. Even Sirius’ mum and Bella were impressed with her.

Sirius stands. “I’ll do my best to make sure you won’t be…bothered anymore.”

Felix waves it away. “After the latest incident, I will increase my security tenfold. Besides, I don’t think you have much say in what he does, do you?”

Sirius glares at him. “Don’t speak of things you don’t understand.”

“I understand enough. You came to Germany, to talk to *me*, to make sure he wasn’t responsible for my situation. which clearly implies you have no trust in what he tells you, or that you didn’t even dare ask him about it.”

“Shut up!”

“To say nothing about what he did to you in the past. Now that I finally know who fucked you up so badly that you are incapable of letting anyone else close, at least I can understand why-”

“Felix,” Sirius warns.

Felix sighs. “Fine.” He stands, comes closer. “You do look well. You always did, but you look even better.” His voice has softened, slightly, or as soft as Felix has it in himself to speak.

It softens Sirius, too. Makes him remember this was a man that offered invaluable comfort to Sirius, at least until things became *complicated* between them.

“I feel better,” he says, honestly.

Felix smiles, a genuine thing. Small, but intimate. “I get it, you know? He’s…an intense man. A bit too old for my taste, but I get the allure.”

“Shut up,” Sirius says again, but this time without anger.

“Be careful, Sirius. Dark lords have a predisposition to fucking up in spectacularly stupid ways somewhere along the line.”

“He’ll be alright.”

A shrug. “I will admit he’s the first I heard of that crawled back from *death*, but… be careful. The Federation and plenty European leaders are watching on with apprehension. They aren’t as blind or as easily bribed as Fudge. And Voldemort *is* interfering in Europe, I can promise you that. Conveniently, we’ve had suspicious activity ramping up in the last couple of years, old Grindelwald followers becoming active again, stirring up trouble, agitating young men, filling their heads with ideas. I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss Voldemort’s interest in mainland Europe.”

Sirius frowns. “He isn’t interested. Even if he were, *we* aren’t interested.”

“I hope you’re right.” He puts his glass on the table, comes even closer to Sirius. “I hear you had another son.”

That makes Sirius’ heart lighter, instantly, just thinking of his baby boy. “Yes. He’s a treasure.”

“I bet he is. And Orion? Marvolo? Harry?”

“Causing headaches to teachers in Hogwarts.”

Felix laughs. “Expected nothing less of them.”

“I hear your son married.”

Felix nods. “I had to bribe him to agree to it, but that’s finally done with. Gilda is getting married next summer, too. With a poor, weak, useless idiot. I can’t wait for him to misstep so I can impale him with something sharp.”

Sirius laughs. “I’m surprised you’d allow her to marry at all, let alone someone like that.”

Felix was hyper protective with Gilda, his daughter. He took great pleasure terrifying her potential suitors away. Sometimes Sirius was there to witness it and have a great laugh.

“She takes after me; too stubborn for her own good, led around by her fancies. I couldn’t make myself deny her, in the end. She’s so vengeful, she’d have ran away if I hadn’t allowed it.”

Sirius did see himself in Gilda quite a lot.

“I’m glad I don’t have daughters,” he says.

Felix smiles, an even gentler thing than the one before. “It’s challenging, I won’t deny it, but worth every headache, I assure you.”

Unlike Sirius and Astrid, that built a good relationship, Felix and Elke were *forced* into marriage, kicking and screaming, and never learned to love each other. When Sirius asked Felix if he has no shame or respect for his wife, to flaunt his affairs so publicly, Felix laughed and claimed Elke has even more affairs than he does.

However, he told Sirius he never regretted the marriage, once his kids were born. That they’re worth even having to put up with his wife.

And despite the deep dislike and disappointment on Elke’s face whenever she glanced at Felix, it was equally clear she adored her children, too.

“I’ll take my leave. Thank you for seeing me.” Sirius really is grateful, especially when he knows he treated Felix horribly.

Felix gives him another careful look, all softness wiped from his features. But his tone remains neutral, almost gentle.

“You have a friend in me,” he says. “Despise everything, I have a soft spot for you. If you’re in need of something, don’t hesitate to reach out. And perhaps now you’ll stop avoiding Germany. Gilda would love seeing you again, and Elke would delight having Astrid over.”

He comes closer still, and before Sirius can react- though, if he’s honest, he had plenty of time to react- Felix gives him a brief hug.

It’s familiar and nice, something Sirius knows so well, something that is nostalgic in a good way.

For two years, Sirius looked up to Felix, learned from him how to find joy, real joy-or as much as he was capable at the time- outside his marriage and status as Head of House Black.

Sirius hugs back. Only for a moment, and then they both step away.

(-)

“I hear you went to Germany,” Voldemort comments, practically as soon as Sirius steps into the kitchen, where Voldemort is busy seasoning some meat.

Sirius takes a seat. He hadn’t know it’s possible for some to aggressively season food, but there’s some violence in the way Voldemort treats the whole process.

“You should have told me-”

“I *did* tell you I had nothing to do with it.” Tone clipped, displeased. Voldemort moves away, washes his hands, and then he garbs a knife and starts taking out his anger on the vegetables. “No matter what I might have said, you wouldn’t have believed me.” *Chop*. A piece of cucumber flies off the cutting board. “Yet I am to understand you believe *him*, since you took a trip to the mainland instead of speaking to me about it.”

Sirius tries to push away the guilt that’s eating him up because he hadn’t trusted Voldemort. Because he treated him poorly in the last weeks.

He feels more guilty about that, than the guilt he felt when he truly believed he got Felix murdered.

“I’m sorry,” he says. As always, the apology flows easier when Voldemort is at the receiving end.“I just-”

“No matter,” Voldemort cuts over him, and slaughters another cucumber, the sharp knife gets stuck into the cutting board and Voldemort has to wrench it free.

It makes Sirius feel even guiltier. It makes him feel sad, a little bit hopeless.

“I wanted to believe you,” he whispers, and he heads over to Voldemort, takes the knife from his hand before he destroys anything else with it. “I want to trust you.”

The knife disappears from Sirius’ hand, materialises back into Voldemort’s, who determinedly chops away at his vegetables. “You will,” he says. “Eventually.”

He sounds so determined, it makes Sirius smile a little. He trusts Voldemort right then; in fact, he trusts Voldemort, *generally*, just not when it comes to killing people close to Sirius, it seems.

Just as he thinks it, Voldemort speaks again. “You won’t see the German again.”

“There might be times I won’t be able to avoid him, at Ministry-“

“You avoided him so far, haven’t you?”

“How would you know that?”

Voldemort dumps the vegetables into a pan, uses a wooden utensil to mix them.

“I went to see him some time ago, took a peek inside his mind.”

Sirius breathes out easier. “Why would you do that?”

“Let us call it curiosity.” Voldemort sprinkles some condiments over the pan. “He should be thankful that is all I did to him. I will do far worse if you see him again.”

“I don’t like that,” Sirius says, honest. Best to express himself clearly. “I don’t like threats.”

“I wasn’t threatening you,” Voldemort points out, unbothered, unashamed.

“Fine,” he concedes. “I won’t see him. I don’t want to see him. He doesn’t mean anything to me,” he reassures Voldemort.

“I know. A cheap replacement, is all he was.”

Not you, too! Sirius rolls his eyes. Felix really isn’t anything like Voldemort!

“That’s why he lives,” Voldemort adds.

The kitchen fills with those wonderful smells Sirius started associating with it, years ago. He leans on the counter, watching Voldemort work for a little while.

“I want you to trust me, too,” he says, quietly. “I know that can’t be easy, either.” After all, from where Voldemort is standing, Sirius lied to him about the locket, then ‘betrayed him’, abandoned him, forsaken him for ten years. “I w-“

Voldemort finally looks at him. He comes closer, takes Sirius’ hand, and before Sirius can even see what is happening, he feels a familiar weight on one of his fingers.

His ring. Well, it’s Voldemort’s ring, but it’s Sirius’ as well, isn’t it?

He looks down at the familiar black stone.

He feels the dark magic settling against his skin, but there’s nothing else coming from it, no jolt of wanting, of possessiveness.

The Horcrux is quiet now that Voldemort has a body again.

Voldemort does trust him; he trusts Sirius to the extent of returning the ring to him.

“I lov-“ Sirius starts to say, overwhelmed by happiness.

“Get out. Wait in the other room. You’ve distracted me enough. If you keep it up, the food will come out badly.”

Sirius rolls his eyes, but leaves him to it, retreats to the living room, where he lays on the couch and admires his ring again.

How will you explain this to Astrid?

Well, not like Astrid would know what the ring is. She's seen it before, in case she remembers well that first year of marriage, and she has no idea about the Gaunts.

She might recognise it's a House ring, though. What will Orion think? Surely he'll ask about -

Stop.

Sirius refuses to think further and spoil his happiness with worrying.

(-)

"He takes after you," Hartwood says, tracing his wand over Helix' arm.

It looks *horrible*.

Whole house is a fucking death trap; Sirius has half a mind to tear it to the ground. They all did their best to find all cursed items and stash them in the attic when Orion was born, but all it took was a couple of minutes of negligence from the elves, a bizarre and unexpected show of accidental magic from his son, and Helix somehow ended up in the attic.

It only took a few seconds for Kreacher to locate him and retrieve him, but those few seconds were enough.

Terrible enough Helix got cursed by a dark artefact, but Sirius was with Voldemort. Astrid's letters didn't reach him.

When Sirius returned in the morning, everyone was angry with him, but that was nothing compared to the guilt and panic Sirius felt when he saw his baby boy injured.

"He asked for you all night," Astrid told him, with the coldest tone he ever heard her use. *"He cried for you all night."*

Apparently the women panicked and took him to St Mungo's, directly, instead of calling Hartwood.

Sirius' mother says Helix was inconsolable, yelled and bit the Healers, asking for Sirius.

Astrid called Lucius, when Sirius failed to answer any of her letters, and at least Lucius seems to have calmed Helix down, even put him to bed back in Grimmauld, assured Helix he got rid of the imaginary monsters in his room.

Usually, Helix insists the monsters are only afraid of Sirius, but he was so exhausted, he made an exception and believed Lucius when he told him he got rid of them.

Sirius found him asleep, Astrid and his mother on either side of the bed, both glaring at Sirius, but when Helix opened his eyes, his gaze wasn't accusatory.

No. He was relived.

"Daddy," he said, with a small smile, reaching for him. *"You're here! Mummy told me you would come, but I was afraid when you didn't! I was in the hospital! They poked me with wands!"*

Sirius doesn't recall a single instance in his life when he felt as guilty as he did when Helix showed him his cursed arm.

"Strong, and stubborn," Hartwood goes on. "And brave."

Helix grins, proud.

"I used to treat your father's injuries all the time," Hartwood tells Helix. "He, too, never made a sound."

"Blacks don't cry!" Helix says, with a nod. "I cried a little at the hospital, but I'm fine now."

Hartwood gives him a fond smile, before looking up to Sirius.

"I'll need to come daily for a couple of weeks or so, to make sure the curse doesn't spread, until it's safe to remove it entirely. I can't do it in one day- it might not be safe, with how small your son is, and the way the curse latched onto his magic. But it will be fine, I promise. Just painful-"

"Blacks don't feel pain," Helix informs him.

"But he'll have the potions to help him."

Sirius nods, kisses Helix' forehead, holds him tighter to his chest, as Hartwood keeps tracing his wand over that little arm.

Helix is fine, if Sirius doesn't look at his arm, it's as if nothing happened to him.

He sleeps a bit more, what with the pain relief potions, he's a bit more clingy than usual, demanding he's always in Sirius' arms, but otherwise he's his cheerful little self.

"Where were you?" Astrid asks, what she never asked in their entire marriage.

"Not now," Sirius says.

It's the dead of night, and they're both in Helix' room, watching him sleep peacefully, surrounded by dozens of plush dogs Lucius and Narcissa dropped off when they visited earlier in the day.

"He was hurt, and I couldn't reach you," Astrid goes on. "You've been away more than half the nights in the past year, and I ignored it, but I cannot ignore *this*."

“I said not now. And if you cannot reach me, you call Bellatrix. I told you this a hundred times; if I am unavailable, you get Bellatrix in an emergency. Why didn’t you?”

Astrid glowers at him. “Helix didn’t need Bellatrix. He needed you. *I* needed you.”

Sirius’ stomach rolls with guilt again. It hadn’t left him since it happened.

“And if Bellatrix is not available, you call Regulus. You didn’t do that either. You got Lucius.”

Not that he’s not grateful for Lucius, but Sirius, unable to deal with this guilt, is fishing for reasons to get angry, to snap at someone.

“Because Helix loves Lucius better; when it became apparent he wasn’t seriously injured, just terribly frightened, I knew Lucius would calm him better than Regu-“

“Lucius isn’t a Black” Sirius snarls at her, in a whisper. “What the hells, Astrid? What were you thinking, failing to inform the people I told you to inform in case of an emergency-“

“*You* failed,” she hisses back. “Lucius isn’t a Black, but Bellatrix and Regulus aren’t Helix’ father. And that’s who he wanted; that’s who he needed. That’s who I needed. Whatever you are doing, with whomever you are doing it with, it needs to stop. I’ve stayed silent long enough. Your family comes first, remember? Walburga says that no matter how many whores your father had, at least he was always there for you, when he was needed-”

“Get out!”

“Daddy?” Helix rubs at his eyes, and the staring match between him and Astrid is interrupted, as they both put a smile on and fuss over Helix.

(-)

Astrid and Sirius can’t quite hide the anger they both feel for each other; they do their best, and Helix is too young to see through the cracks, but the rest of the boys will be home in a couple of days, and they won’t have as much luck fooling them.

Sirius doesn’t even know why he’s so mad at her- rather, he knows there’s no reason for it, but he’s still angry, finds absurd ways to blame her for Helix’ injury, for not calling Bellatrix, for speaking ill of his father.

He punishes Dobby, takes away his impressive sock collection Sirius allowed him to own; he wanted to banish Kreacher to France for his incompetence, but then realised they’d all starve without him, so he found no way to punish the idiot, but snaps at him whenever he sets his eyes on him.

He yelled at his grandmother, too. A house with two elves, three adult witches, and his son still got hurt!

Strangely, he's not upset with his mum, mostly because now she's the only one on his side inside the home. Astrid finally turned against him, but his mum never will, so he doesn't scream at her, even if she slapped him on that first day, told him to make sure he can be reached in case of emergencies.

Sirius made sure of it, Voldemort modified the wards to allow letters from his sons through, but, of course, Helix can't exactly send a letter, so Sirius will have to convince Voldemort to allow his mother's owl to reach the cabin. That will be a *great* talk, he's sure.

He knows that if he could see Voldemort, even for a few hours, his temper would improve, but he doesn't want to leave Helix' side, and Helix is glued to him non-stop, so he can't go to Voldemort. He blames this on Astrid, too. If not for her, he could just take Helix with him.

On the second day after the injury, he actually considers going to the cabin with Helix anyway, especially when, in his letter to Sirius, Voldemort said Hartwood is taking a *'antiquated, conventional, too cautious approach'* to Helix' curse, and that he could heal it in mere hours.

It's for Helix, he tells himself, but he knows, deep down, going to Voldemort would be for *him*, not Helix, and that Hartwood might be 'conventional and too cautious' in his treatments, but in the decades he has served the Blacks, he has not once failed them, and 'cautious' is a good thing when it comes to his son's health.

So Sirius stays home, exchanges letters with Voldemort three, four times a day.

Bella shows up, spoils Helix rotten, making him laugh his little head off; she spoils Sirius, too, her presence always like a balm for him, calming him slightly.

And then the boys return from Hogwarts.

(-)

Sirius hasn't exchanged any letters with Orion for longer than a month; he mellowed out a bit since their fight, he misses Orion, and after the fright of finding Helix injured, he's ready to forgive his eldest. He decides he'll let the matter go.

But that's before he sees Orion.

Oh, this boy, Sirius thinks, when Orion glares at him with hostility, as soon as he steps foot inside Grimmauld. He's affectionate with his mother, grandmother, and Helix, but when he stares at Sirius-

Alright, then, he thinks when Orion immediately goes to his room, mere minutes after returning home.

At dinner, when he comes down, his attitude remains the same. Furthermore, Sirius notices Orion is staring daggers at Harry, too.

So Sirius doesn't say a word to him, doesn't rescind his punishment.

Orion remains confined to his room outside of mealtimes.

Sirius takes away his owl, too, for good measure.

"How long will you keep this up?" Astrid asks him, a couple of days before Yule, her firsts words to him since *that* night.

Sirius doesn't answer, going over some Ministry parchments.

"Yule is coming; surely, you won't-'

"He will eat with us, as he does every day."

"And when we go to Malfoy Manor?"

Every year, on the third day of Yule, everyone worth anything goes to Malfoy Manor.

"He will stay home."

"Then I shall stay home with him." Her tone is so cold, it could freeze over the Hells.

"No."

He doesn't look up from his parchments, but he can feel her gaze on him. He waits in silence, until she sighs. "When will it end, Sirius?"

"He knows how to fix it."

"Does he?" she challenges. "How can he fix it? What are you waiting for? For him to apologise? You taught him never to apologise! And you know he is sorry, you know-"

"This is between us, don't interfere." His own tone turns cold.

(-)

On Yule, Sirius doesn't get any gifts for Orion, and he tells the rest of the adults in his family to follow his lead.

Astrid and Regulus obey him, but no such luck with his mother and grandmother, who not only bought Orion gifts, but they seem to have overcompensated.

Worse, grandmother Irma got nothing for Harry. She stares at Sirius throughout the meal, daring him to say something.

Sirius doesn't bother; ever since Irma came to live with them, he knew it would be a losing battle to have her treat Harry warmly; he settled with her acting polite, which so far she did. But she never hid her adoration for Orion; everyone beside Astrid plays favourites in their family, but with Irma- she doesn't even *try* to pretend. Orion can do no wrong in her eyes, she calls him 'my favourite boy' loudly and often, in front of the others; she's kind to Marvolo, and she's often found holding Helix but when Orion is around, the rest of the household might as well not exist as far as she's concerned.

Not too long ago, she barged into Sirius' office, without knocking, the only one to do so beside Bella, and she slammed some parchments on the desk.

"My will," she said, and did not wait for an answer before fucking off.

Sirius was not surprised Orion is the sole beneficiary of her will, outside a chest full of jewellery that once belonged to Pollux that she set aside for Marvolo.

Narcissa is so mad at her, more than once reminded her she has other great-grandchildren, the only one that dared mouth off to Irma, who ignores Draco as thoroughly as she ignores Harry.

"You birthed a Malfoy," was all she told Narcissa. *"Not a Black."*

Sirius was surprised about that, since everyone knew Cygnus was her favourite son, so they'd have expected her to dote on Draco on account of that, but no; only Orion exists in her heart, with a little room for Marvolo and Helix. She turns her nose at Elara, too. *"She's like Walburga,"* she mentions, often, displeased.

Though, of course, Bella could be said is like *Walburga,* too, but Irma loves Bella, and she's deluded, insists Bellatrix is 'a replica of darling Cygnus'.

She was just as bad when Sirius was a child, really. She favoured Sirius and Bella, and barely looked at the others.

And now she's on a war path, spoiling Orion more than usual, because she feels he's treated unfairly.

Sirius' mother is mad at Sirius, too. She comes to see him in his office, after the grand Yule meal.

"You're both stubborn," she says. "I've seen this play out before, might I remind you?"

Sirius snorts. "If I talked to Father the way Orion talked to me-"

"Even Orion understood, once you were old enough, that sometimes it's better to let you be, what with your temper."

“And I ran away,” Sirius reminds her, and that shuts her up, she doesn’t mention taking it easy on Orion again.

Arcturus always bemoaned how Sirius’ father was too lax with Sirius, and that’s why Sirius grew apart from the family.

Sirius doesn’t think it was so, but maybe the old man was right. He’s not about to risk it.

If Astrid and his mother trying to intervene on Orion’s behalf annoyed him, when Marvolo comes, Sirius almost melts.

“Father,” he says, all serious. “May I stay home tomorrow, instead of coming to Malfoy Manor?”

“You love going there,” Sirius reminds him, softly.

Yule at Malfoy Manor is- well, not many things in the world rival it.

Even Sirius, as a child, always looked forward to it.

Marvolo nods. “I do. But I wouldn’t enjoy it knowing Orion is stuck here, all alone.”

Sirius studies him carefully. “Would you even notice? He never plays with you there, he goes off with his friends, and leaves you alone. At worst, he bullies you.”

Marvolo shrugs. He bites his lip, considers it for a few seconds, then meets Sirius’ eyes. “He’s my brother,” he says. “I don’t want to go without him. I’m sorry, Father, I don’t mean to upset you, and if you command it, I will come, of course, but if I may, I’d prefer to stay home with him.”

Sirius pulls him into a hug. He does it so fast, Marvolo yelps in surprise, but then he relaxes and hugs Sirius back.

“I love you,” Sirius whispers in his ear. “You’re a good son, and a good brother. I’m very proud of you.”

He lets him go, and Marvolo smiles. “Thank you, Father.”

When Astrid learns of it, she gets a *look* about her, and she seems ready to give Sirius a piece of her mind, but it seems she reconsiders, and accepts it with a nod.

And that’s when Orion finally comes to him; late at night, on the second Yule day, with a firm knock on Sirius’ office door.

He looks as hostile as ever, staring at Sirius with as much defiance as he does every day.

Sirius smothers the pride he feels, the impulse to hug the little shit, tell him he’s doing well.

“I’m sorry,” Orion spits, and he is growing, that little snarl of his has more weigh to it than it did a year before. Of course, it’s ruined by the way his voice breaks these days, oscillates

from a childish higher tone, to something deeper, and then back again.

“You’re not,” Sirius informs him.

That only makes Orion madder.

“It’s not fair to Marvolo, alright?” Orion says. “He didn’t do anything wrong, why would he be punished? Just let me come to Malfoy Manor. I’ll stay put on a couch, I won’t enjoy a thing, but he shouldn’t have to suffer here alone. It isn’t fair for Mother, either, having to go to a Yule celebration without her eldest sons.”

It really does make him very proud.

Sirius and Regulus stood up for each other, too, in their childhood; against *others*, that is. They never did it with their parents. On the contrary, Regulus was fast to blame everything on Sirius, to gain their father’s favour, and Sirius would always punish Regulus when their mother showed him love over Sirius.

At least I did something right, he thinks, watching Orion and Marvolo having each other’s backs like this.

“It isn’t fair,” Sirius agrees. “You will one day lead this family; it’s best you learn, early on, that when you make a mistake, you won’t suffer the consequences alone. If you fail, if you stumble, your behaviour will affect the entire family.”

Orion frowns, forgets to stare at Sirius with hostility. He hesitates, opens his mouth, closes it again.

“But I can fix mistakes,” he says, though it sounds more like a question. His voice wavers again, more childlike now.

“Small mistakes, like this, yes, you can fix. Yet it’s best not to make any mistake at all. There are some that you can never fix; there will be moments in your life, when your mistakes can irreversibly cost your family. I won’t let you grow up into a man that makes thoughtless mistakes.”

Orion swallows. He looks unsure. He looks a child, even if he’s getting *ridiculously* tall these days.

“Men like you and me,” Sirius says, softer, “we cannot afford to misstep. You will one day have great power, but you know that comes with responsibility. I would have run this family into its grave if it weren’t for my grandfather; if I hadn’t listened to him, if I didn’t let him lead me, then all of us would be dead.”

Sirius once yelled at Arcturus, threaten to disown him, all over Voldemort.

Like a child, he was so mad at his grandfather, wondered why the old man never listened to him, never trusted his choices.

He was so cocky, so assured Voldemort will win the war, and Sirius was right to side with him, to give him everything, to prove Arcturus wrong.

But Arcturus wasn't wrong. Arcturus was right, and if it weren't for him, Sirius and Bella would be in Azkaban still, his mother would have died, and gods know where Regulus would be? Probably dead in Egypt, what with his temper, but with no Sirius or Arcturus to back him up when he messes with dangerous men.

Without Arcturus and his guidance, Sirius would have never known how to lead the family; after Azkaban, after the potions and the ring, Sirius always sought his advice, heeded it, trailed after him in Wizengamot meetings, finally gave his grandfather the respect that was due.

And Sirius grew strong. When the Head of House is strong, the rest of the family grows strong with him.

It's best Orion understands early on that he needs to obey and respect Sirius; it's best he understands it after being locked in his room for a couple weeks, rather than locked in Azkaban for seven months.

"Go back to your room," Sirius says.

Orion wants to argue further, it's obvious, the way his shoulders draw even tighter with tension, his eyes spark with frustration, but-

He leaves without another word.

(-)

"He's doing the right thing," Abraxas says. Sirius overhears him in the garden, talking to his mother.

Sirius is in no mood for the party, so he went for a walk, to smoke a cigarette, and stumbled over his mother and Abraxas enjoying a glass of whiskey on a bench. She has his winter cloak draped over her shoulder, the Malfoy crest glinting in the moonlight.

It makes Sirius smile, the unnecessary gesture. The surrounding area is charmed, clearly, no snow reaching them, perfect temperature, but useless as it was, Abraxas gave her his cloak, and- well, it makes Sirius smile, even if he also hates seeing his mother wearing anything with a Malfoy crest on it.

"He's going too far," she insists. "I don't even know what happened, Orion won't tell me, but it couldn't have been so bad. And now the poor thing spent the entire holiday locked up in his room. Sirius is too harsh with him."

Abraxas snorts. “*Too harsh*,” he mocks. “Sirius and Lucius let those heirs of theirs run amok, with no real consequences in sight.“

“That is not true! Well, it is for Lucius, but Sirius always-”

“Yes, Sirius is better at it, at least makes an effort to discipline that hellion. And Orion is stronger than Draco because of it, isn’t he?”

“He’s just a kid; not even thirteen. It’s cruel to lock him up inside the home for the entire holiday.”

“Cruel,” Abraxas mocks again. “Gods, I wish Lucius would give me that son of his for a week. I’d straighten him up! I despair thinking of the future of my family, when it will be Draco’s turn to lead it. Look at Lucius! I made him competent. And look at Sirius! Orion and Arcturus managed to make him competent, too. And now maybe Sirius will turn his boy into someone worthy of leading a noble house. You wouldn’t understand it, you have the soft heart of a woman-”

His mother slaps him over the arm. “Gods, you’re such an idiot!”

“You do! Look at you, moping around, as if your grandson was sent to war, not to his room.”

“You know, from all the people in the world, I believe you’re the only one to have called me soft-hearted.”

“The rest of the world hardly knows you, darling.”

Sirius makes a face and turns around, before he starts acting like a child and goes there and kills Abraxas for calling his mother ‘darling’. That would put a damper on the celebration.

Though it might put a smile on Lucius’ face.

He frowns. He doesn’t like Abraxas approving of Sirius’ parenting. He doesn’t want Orion to one day cheer when Sirius dies, the way Lucius will when his dad finally folds over.

(-)

“Are you and mum fighting because of Orion?” Marvolo asks, loitering around Sirius in the office.

He knew the older kids won’t take long in noticing the frosty attitude between him and Astrid.

Sirius makes a sound that could be agreement, could be denial.

“She says you’re not fighting but I don’t believe her.”

Sirius makes the same sound again.

Marvolo sighs. “I don’t like it! I don’t like Orion locked in his room, and Helix injured, and you and mum fighting! Harry is mad with Orion, too. I don’t like it at all.”

“Well, at least you’re doing fine,” Sirius says. “As long as at least one of us is acting right, we’ll all be fine eventually.”

Marvolo sighs again. “Yes,” he agrees. “I’m doing my best, Father.”

It makes Sirius smile. “Good boy.”

“If Orion keeps acting up, will you disown him and make me heir, instead?”

“No. I told you, there would be no disowning anyone.”

“Grandpa Arcturus said-”

“He’s dead. And I’m not disowning anyone.”

“What if Orion marries a mudblood?”

Sirius looks up. “Why, is he seeing a muggleborn at school?”

Marvolo shakes his head. “No, he’s courting Lavender. But what if he were to marry a mudblood, Father?”

“He’s not marrying a muggleborn, so no sense in thinking about it.”

“You wouldn’t let him?”

“Have you met him? He’s a little bigot, no way he’s marrying a muggleborn. Besides, your mother would kill him before I can disown him.”

Marvolo snorts. “True. So, anyway, if you wouldn’t disown Orion for marrying a mudblood, you wouldn’t disown me for getting an ‘A’ in Potions?”

Sirius laughs. *Gods, this boy*. “I already saw your end of semester report, Marvolo.”

Marvolo’s eyes grow big. “You did?!”

“Of course.”

He breathes in relief. “Gods, why didn’t you say anything?! I spent the entire holiday thinking how to tell you!”

Sirius ruffles his hair, messing it up. Marvolo grunts something and steps away, quickly trying to arrange it back in place. “How did you get an ‘A’, anyway?”

“It’s Professor Snape’s fault! I was so distraught over his slimly hair- it was worse than ever that day- and a huge stain on his robe, that I forgot to stir in the right direction! Truly, Father,

you should have a talk with Headmaster Dumbledore! Professor Snape's lack of hygiene is interfering with my education! I already wrote to Professor Dumbledore, and he sent back a note saying I won't always be in control of my environment and that I should learn to ignore distractions!"

"How about you go shopping with Grandma, and you buy a nice robe and a bottle of the best anti-grease shampoo you can find, huh? You can give them to Snape when term starts. Say your father sent them to him."

"YES!" Marvolo perks up. "What a wonderful idea, Father! You always find a solution to everything!"

Sirius winks at him. "After you hand him the gift, run fast, yes? He'll probably be overwhelmed with emotion, wouldn't do to be there if he starts crying in gratitude. Just hand it and run."

"Yes, Father!" He scurries outside, yelling for his grandmother to take him to Diagon Alley for an important mission.

(-)

On the last day of December, Sirius sends his family to Malfoy Manor for their New Year party. Astrid put up a fight, but in the end she had little choice but to accept it, and they all fucked off to Lucius', including that old relic, Irma.

Sirius stays behind, with Orion and Helix.

Finally, he can breathe in peace.

Helix wants Orion, so Sirius allows Orion to leave his room to play with his younger brother and entertain him.

Of course, Helix refuses to let Sirius out of his sight, so Sirius sits close by, sipping at his whiskey, and exchanging letters with Voldemort.

'Enjoy the New Year celebrations,' the last letter said, and Sirius hesitates for a second before grabbing the quill and a fresh roll of parchment.

'I'm not going,' he writes. *'Hartwood said Helix shouldn't exert himself, that he needs rest, so I am staying home with him and Orion.*

I prefer it this way. I'm in no mood for a party or suffering Abraxas. It's even better having Grandma off my back- gods, I'm thinking I should banish her again, send her to France once more. No, further than that. I should send her to Australia.'

“Father, he won’t eat,” Orion complains, both he and Kreacher trying to feed Helix, who is a terribly picky eater.

His mother says Sirius had been picky as a child, too, but not *this* picky.

Sirius sighs, and goes to help, but Helix is stubborn, complains the carrots are too orange, or not orange enough, that the potatoes apparently hate him, the cucumbers are at war with the tomatoes, and the roast beef is ‘sad’.

Kreacher looks close to tears, but he lasts the longest, patiently coaxing Helix to at last try some of the food, quickly whipping out new dishes, parading them in front of Helix, who just scrunches up his nose, and yells that he’s hungry, but won’t eat anything.

It’s a daily occurrence, really, so Kreacher keeps at it until finally Helix judges his meal is ‘fine’ and starts eating.

Another letter comes. Sirius opens it, and feels a flash of disappointment, because this one looks so short. Voldemort kept Sirius sane these past couple of weeks by sending him several letters a day, all the length of a small novel.

But when Sirius reads the few words, his disappointment quickly turns to excitement.

‘Since you have Grimmauld to yourself and the boys, may I come over? After you put them to sleep?’

No, of course not, Sirius thinks. Even his father didn’t bring his lovers to Grimmauld.

His ancestors would turn in their graves.

No, absolutely not. What a ridiculous idea! Never.

‘Sure,’ Sirius writes back.

(-)

Seeing Voldemort calms Sirius, the knot in his stomach going away for the first time in two weeks.

He has the impulse to tackle him, right there in the hallway, climb on him and just hold him tightly.

He manages to abstain, leads Voldemort to the library, though he does stay very close to him, and just the scent of him makes Sirius feel a thousand times better.

Sirius puts Grimmauld under lockdown; he doesn’t see why anyone would pop back home from Malfoy Manor during the party, but just to be sure.

Unnecessary. of course; even if someone came home- what of it? He's just having a talk with the dark lord in the library, there's nothing wrong with that.

It's not like he'll have sex with him in Grimmauld, with his sons there. Ridiculous. Of course he wouldn't.

(-)

"It's my birthday," Voldemort says, in Sirius' bed, an hour or so before midnight.

Sirius, getting his breathing back under control, looks at him. "*What?* Really?"

"Yes."

Voldemort looks even more handsome in Sirius' bed, surrounded by Sirius' things.

Sirius never wanted to change anything about his home, despite Astrid begging him to allow her to redecorate. No, Sirius wanted Grimmauld to remain untouched, just the way he remembered it as a child, the way his father left it.

But he'd want Voldemort inside it. Of course, that's the only change Sirius *cannot* make.

He feels guilty for not having known it is Voldemort's birthday. How on earth did he not know that?

"You should have told me earlier! I would have bought you a gift-"

Voldemort smiles, turns on his side. "You just gave me a gift."

Sirius rolls his eyes. "Not sex! Something better!"

Voldemort's eyebrow quirks, doubtful. And yeah, alright, there aren't many things better than sex, but still.

"You can pick one of the rare books in the library," Sirius offers, trying to find something.

"Daddy!" Helix whispers-yells, shoving the door open.

He's rubbing at his eyes and, thankfully, a split second is all Voldemort needs to become camouflaged to perfection next to Sirius.

Swearing, Sirius stands. At least he has his pants on. He pulls on his robe, discarded on the floor.

"Knock!" he says sternly, and a little frustrated.

“I will,” Helix promises, unbothered, as he promises every time Sirius wakes up with his tiny face looming inches away from his own, or with cold little feet on his back.

Sirius intercepts him in the middle of the room, grabs his hand and leads him out the door. “What is it?”

“There’s a monster in my room, big and scary and with red eyes.”

“Well, there’s one of those in my room as well.” Sirius shuts the door behind them.

“Really?” Helix’ eyes grow wide. “I didn’t see it.”

“He’s scared of little children, had a bad experience with a baby once, so he hid.”

“Oh!” Helix raises his arms, demanding, and Sirius picks him up.

The door to his room opens again, seemingly on its own accord, as they walk down the hallway.

“Can we trade monsters, Daddy? Mine is not afraid of children. He’s only afraid of you!”

Sirius snorts and goes up a level, to his youngest’s room.

“He’s under the bed,” Helix points. “Tried to grab me in my sleep because my foot was out of the blanket.”

Sirius puts him down by the door, looks under the bed. He pulls his wand out from his robe pocket, casts some pretty lights at absolutely nothing more than a little spider, scurrying away.

“Done.”

“That’s the protection spell, Daddy?”

Sirius forgot what he said it was, last time. He nods. “Sure.”

“Check the closet, too! Maybe it has a friend in there.”

Sirius obliges him. “Done! The room is safe now.”

“They’re so afraid of you! They always run when they see you! Thank you, Daddy!” Helix comes inside and hugs Sirius’s legs. “OH! Here!” He runs to his little desk and pulls out an old perfume bottle on which Astrid had written ‘MONSTER SPRAY’. “For your monster Daddy. It stopped working on mine, maybe he got used to it, but it will help with your monster!”

Sirius picks Helix up again, kisses his all over, making the boy giggle. He settles him into bed, puts some socks on him, reassuring him they’re extra protection against anything that would try to grab his legs.

“Read me a story, Daddy. Please!”

Just because Voldemort is right there in the room with them, invisible, Sirius summons ‘The Tales of Beedle the Bard’ from the bookshelf and starts reading about the deathly hallows.

“I like this one the best,” Helix says, yawning, when the story ends. “Maybe we’ll get them. Me and Orion and Marvolo-”

“Orion, Marvolo and I,” Sirius corrects.

“We’re three brothers, and there are three hallows.”

Sirius frowns. “There’s four of you.”

Helix shrugs, closing his eyes, snuggling under the blanket. “Harry is nice, and he’s our brother in a way, but not really. He’s not blood. Blood matters, Daddy. He’s not a Black.”

“Who told you that?”

“Grandma Irma. And Uncle Reggie.” Helix yawns again. “I’d take the cloak. So I can fight monsters, and they wouldn’t see me. I’d want the wand more, but probably Orion will get that. I can’t stop him, he’s too big. Besides, he’s your son and heir. He’ll get our house, our gold, so probably the powerful wand, too. Marvolo’s the spare, and Harry is your special ward. What does that make me, Daddy?”

Sirius bends to kiss his forehead, pushes some hair strands out of his eyes. “You wanna know what that makes you?”

“Mhh-mm” Helix is almost asleep.

“It’s a secret though, you can’t tell the others.”

“Won’t.”

“It makes you my favourite son.”

Helix smiles, pleased.

Sirius strokes his hair for another handful of minutes until the boy is asleep.

(-)

“I see my ‘protection spells’ didn’t manage to dispel you,” Sirius whispers sarcastically as he walks down the stairs. Voldemort becomes visible at his side.

“I would suggest you do not try the monster spray.”

Sirius laughs. “I am tempted.”

“The curse still clings strongly to him. I could sense it from the doorway.”

“I told you, Hartwood is removing it slowly.”

Voldemort seems lost in thought once they’re back in the library. He stands beside the window, looking into the distance, as Sirius pours himself a glass of whiskey.

“I imagined a father, when I was very young,” Voldemort finally speaks. “I did not picture something like this.”

Sirius lights a cigarette and sits on his armchair, in front of the fireplace. “Meaning?”

“The trust he has in you, unshakable; the way you lie to him, with no qualms.”

Sirius laughs. “You try telling a four-year-old child that there are no such things as monsters hiding under his bed. I don’t lie to him to have a laugh. I don’t want to dismiss his worries, just reassure him he’ll be alright.”

Voldemort tilts his head. “You told him he is your favourite child.”

Sirius blinks. “That’s a white lie. There is a lot of competition between them, and they all seek my attention. They all want to be the best, in my eyes. I love them all equally, but a young child doesn’t like to hear that.”

“You don’t.”

“I *certainly*-”

“It is clear you are equally attached to all of them, but when you speak about Orion…it’s different from the others. If someone would make you choose between them, if you could only save one from certain death, you would pick your son and heir.”

Leave it with Voldemort to come up with such examples. Sirius takes a sip of his drink. Voldemort comes closer.

“I know what awaits him in the future. I know what burdens he’ll carry. And he’ll be the only one to understand mine, when he’s old enough.” Sirius falls silent for a few moments, hesitating. “When he was born, it was a …difficult time. I hardly remember much of anything, but when I hold him for the first time…” he shrugs. “He’s not my favourite; I adore all of them. It’s just that he’s…it’s a different situation.”

Voldemort smiles. “He is your favourite.”

Sirius rolls his eyes. “Not at the moment, he’s not,” he insists. “The little terror, you should see his attitude lately, clinging to his pride.”

“I wonder where he got that from.“

“Hey! I’m his father! He’s not supposed to be that way with me.”

“Hmm.”

“Go ahead, pick a book, won’t you?” Sirius says, to change the subject. “I’m generous, so I’ll give you two.”

As intended, when tempted with rare books, Voldemort discards any other subject.

It always delights Sirius, whenever he’s reminded what a bookworm Voldemort is.

He knows Tom Riddle must have been a massive nerd, but he also knows he wouldn’t have been like Hermione, or some of the nerds Sirius knew in his time; no, he wouldn’t have be socially awkward, or snotty. For one, he was gorgeous. Self-assured, arrogant, and insanely powerful.

And intelligent. Naturally so, unlike so many bookworms that only swallow those damn books and recite them back with no thought of their own.

(-)

Ten minutes before midnight, they both hear footsteps.

“Don’t,” Sirius says, when Voldemort means to charm himself invisible again.

“Father, may I-” Orion enters the library, sees Voldemort and trails off. “Oh,” he breathes out. “I didn’t know you had company.” He steps back. “I’ll go back to my-“

“Come in.”

Take it down a notch, Sirius thinks at Voldemort, who stares so intently at the poor boy.

Sirius knows it’s just interest, that Voldemort is curious about him, but that’s only because Sirius knows him. For anyone else, for a child, that stare comes off as incredibly intimidating.

But Orion steps back inside, shoulders straight, head raised, and he meets Voldemort’s eyes.

“My son, Orion,” Sirius says. “This is the dark lord.”

They both sit, Voldemort on another armchair, beside his stack of books, Orion on the couch closest to Sirius.

Orion stares at Voldemort with awe and excitement; meeting a living legend would do that to a child, Sirius supposes. Not just a child, really. People of all ages are in awe when faced with Voldemort.

He remembers when he first stood in front of him, all those years ago. It's odd, thinking of a time when he didn't know Voldemort, when he only thought he knew of the terror he represents, when he thought of Voldemort as simply an overpowered maniac; when he hated Voldemort.

But then Sirius saw him in the flesh, and he was instantly in awe; even hating him, even thinking he was there to kill Sirius, he couldn't help but gawk at him, couldn't help feeling he was standing in the presence of a god.

Sirius is excited; this was a dream of his, an ardent desire, having Voldemort meet his children. It's what Sirius most values in life, his greatest accomplishments, his pride and joy. He wanted to present them to Voldemort, because he might be biased, but he thinks his boys are walking, talking miracles, magic's greatest gifts. He knows Voldemort can't possibly think the same, yet Sirius wanted them to meet all the same.

Wanted his sons to meet him too- and not the dark lord, the myth, but *him*, the man Sirius knows.

His boys will never, no matter how long they live, how far they travel, encounter a man like Voldemort. They shouldn't be deprived of the opportunity.

And this is Sirius' Voldemort, not the dark lord. Sirius has seen Voldemort around plenty of people, and how he changes, shifts, becomes the persona he feels the need to project, but it isn't happening now.

"I've heard much about you," he tells Orion, voice coloured with amusement, because Orion refused to talk first. "I am pleased to finally meet you."

His son's shoulders straighten with self-importance. He casts a swift glance in Sirius' direction, and when Sirius nods, Orion answers. "Likewise, sir."

That amuses Voldemort as well. It's probably been a while since anyone called him 'sir'.

"What did you want with me?" Sirius asks. He knows, of course. All day, Orion kept looking at Sirius when he thought he wasn't noticed, and every time Sirius caught him, his son looked softer and softer, his anger all mellowed out.

"It can wait," Orion says. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's alright," Sirius assures him. "I was getting bored, and he was busy robbing our library."

"Borrowing," Voldemort corrects. "I'll give them back."

Sirius snorts. He's never getting those books back, he knows.

Voldemort turns his full attention to Orion, and in no time, they're talking, mostly about Hogwarts.

Orion is so engrossed, he fails to notice or react to the fireworks going off outside when the clock strikes midnight.

His sons both like Dumbledore, but now Orion makes sure to allude he disapproves of the Headmaster, and of Moody.

Wait 'till you find out that's Rodolphus.

Voldemort not only doesn't adopt his dark lord persona, but he dials up his charisma to such an extent, that by the time Sirius sends Orion to bed, his son is clearly enamoured with him.

"I understand the favouritism better, now," Voldemort says, when they're alone, satisfied, as if he uncovered a great mystery. "He reminds me of your father. Of course you'd favour him."

Sirius laughs. "Well, Arcturus raised him. And Arcturus raised Father, too, so…yeah, they're a bit similar, I suppose. Only a bit, though. Father wasn't so…wild."

Voldemort gives him a look. "Not by the time he had you, no. But he had plenty attitude when he was young."

His mother says that, too, but it's so hard for Sirius to imagine his father as a wilful child. "I wish they'd have met," he says. If Voldemort wasn't there, the thought would make him sad, as it always does, when he thinks his father never had the chance to meet his grandkids.

Alas, with Voldemort there…everything is easier to bear.

(-)

"It's healed." Hartwood frowns. "I don't understand". Helix' arm is unblemished, no scarring left, no inky black curse simmering under his skin.

"The red-eyed monster did it," Helix declares. "Not mine. He said he was your monster, Daddy."

"May I have a look at Helix' curse before I go?" Voldemort asks.

Sirius leads him to the bedroom, stays in the doorway as Voldemort bends over Helix, wand in hand.

"Are you a monster?" Helix asks, sleepy, when he wakes up. He's groggy, Voldemort cast several numbing spells on him before he started working on removing the curse.

"Your father's monster," Voldemort answers, amused.

"Ah, alright then," Helix says, closing his eyes again. "If you're Daddy's, then you're safe."

“I’ve ordered all other monsters, my underlings, to never bother you again.”

“Thank you,” Helix mumbles. “That's very helpful.”

Sirius laughs, picking him up.

“Totally better than mine, Daddy. He has red eyes, but he’s handsome. I think you are wrong, he didn’t seem scared of me, even if I am a child.”

Sirius kisses his forehead. “That is because you’re a special kid. Better than all other kids.”

Helix likes hearing that.

He never again complains about monsters in his room.

(-)

He’s sleeping. In the past, he’d always wake up the second Sirius would, in the rare moments when Voldemort slept at all to begin with.

But now he doesn’t stir. Sirius watches his chest rising and falling, slowly, limbs relaxed, a neutral expression on his face, unburdened.

Since he came back, Voldemort hadn’t had a nightmare. He used to have terrible ones, he’d bolt out of bed with a wild look in his eyes, magic crackling ominously around him, and Sirius used to wonder what on earth could cause the dark lord nightmares.

Sirius reaches out, slowly, carefully, touches his face gently, and still, Voldemort doesn’t wake up. But his face does press into Sirius’ palm, nudging at it, and something funny happens to Sirius’ insides; it feels as if his stomach drops, at the same time his heart soars, and a knot lodges itself in his throat.

He curls his fingers around that well defined, too sharp jaw, and then Voldemort leans in until his chest is pressed to Sirius’.

That’s when he wakes up. Dark, long eyelashes flutter lazily, and then he smiles when his eyes finally focus on Sirius’ face.

It’s perfect. Sirius could spend his whole life in this moment, and he would never tire of it.

He smiles back, swallow past the knot in his throat. Voldemort’s fingers find their way to Sirius’ face, and they just spend some moments like that, in this perfect, silent bliss.

Voldemort moves, slightly, ever so gently, until his forehead rests on Sirius’, only for a moment before he retreats and theirs eyes meet.

He's so *delicate* like this, ethereal in a way only Voldemort can be, the pale moon light casting shadows all over him, but his eyes shine ever so brightly.

"You were right." His voice is but a whisper in the night. His features are no longer relaxed, the ever-present power radiating from him again, the burdening intelligence he carries in his eyes. "That night," he goes on, and Sirius instinctively knows which night he's speaking of.

Don't, he almost begs. He doesn't want to remember it, nor speak of it. And yet…there's burning curiosity alongside the dread.

He knows he was right, every single thing he said on Samhain in '81 was true, but it's fascinating to hear Voldemort admitting it. He's curious what he is ready to admit Sirius was right about, in particular.

His fingers move over the bridge of Sirius' nose, down his cheekbone, stop on his jaw, curl slightly. His eyes never leave Sirius'.

"I am grateful the curse rebounded."

Sirius did not expect *that.*

"If I had killed the boy, if I had won the war, I'd have done terrible things to you." Voldemort's eyes darken. His eyes are rarely dark; deep brown, red, a mixture, it doesn't matter; the lighting or lack of lighting never matters, either. Voldemort's eyes are never dark. Sirius always saw warmth in them. *Life*. There's always fire there, blazing.

"You'd have run from me, and I'd have chased you, caught you. I'd have told myself it's for your own good. I'd have kept you."

"No," Sirius says, even if he *does* believe it, but it's just that Voldemort looks sad, and Sirius does not want him sad. "You-"

Voldemort's fingers move again, press lightly over Sirius' lips. "Yes. I had it all planned out, I picked up your chains, comfortable and soft, yet unyielding." He sighs. "And I'd have never had this. You were right. I'd have had all the power, eternal victory, but I would have lost the most precious thing I ever had."

"You'll kill all your enemies, you'll have all the power, but you'll be alone and cold and miserable. You could have had something- we could have had something. I love you, but you throw that away in your chase of imaginary enemies. You're too busy trying to keep your life and immortality to even realise what you lost."

"I didn't crave power in Albania. I didn't think of my enemies. All I ever thought about was you."

Alone and cold and miserable.

"I'm s-" Sirius tries to say, even if he told himself he won't apologise again for leaving Voldemort to his fate. But Voldemort's fingers apply more pressure over his lips.

“Don’t,” he orders. “It doesn’t matter anymore. It is in the past.” He blinks and his eyes lose that dark quality. They’re warm once more. “I have you, and I won’t ever allow anyone to separate us again. Not even you; not even me- especially not me.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, I know I am very late! Life and all that! I truly am sorry, and I feel very guilty for it, trust me! Hope you will enjoy this chapter! If you are still here, I would love to hear from you in the comments! ❤️

Works inspired by this one

[COVER ART] for It runs in the blood by Metalomagnetic by rainmaketh

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!